

ALL IN A NIGHT

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by

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François tried to see the time by his watch, but the light, fine drizzle which had started to fall prevented him from seeing the hands: the glass was wet.

François shrugged. What was the use anyway? Night was putting an end, with a sort of shamefaced rapidity, to the early autumn day. The sun had made a brief, half-hearted attempt to show itself and set a touch of fire to the horizon. With the approach of dusk the evening mists had turned to a washed-out blue. In the distance the undulating line of the hills, here soft and distant, there notched and broken, stood out with a kind of ravished beauty. The tops of the thinning poplars, now turning red, imparted something of brightness to the landscape. A farm took on the menacing solidity of a fortress: a clump of trees looked massive and impenetrable. The only movement came from the quivering of the lemon-coloured poplars: the only sound was a bird's thin call. The sun disappeared behind a gathering of level storm-clouds driving from the west. Under an evil, reddish glow the countryside seemed to lie in the grip of terror.

September had drawn to an early end: the bad season had come before its time. Already the branches

of the trees were showing black through the thin network of their leaves fretted by wind and rain.

The cats had left the secretive tangle of climbing plants upon the walls, moving away from the sour smell of dahlias, seeking refuge in the evergreens.

What a fool I was to leave the train and try to finish the journey on foot! I don't recognize a thing, and I shall be overtaken by the dark. That's something I don't like.

He started to whistle though he put but little heart into it. He was carrying a rucksack, and, now and again, slipped his hands under the straps to take the weight from his skinny shoulders.

I didn't want anyone to meet me. I know so well that No. 1, for-public-occasions, embrace that father gives on such occasions. . . . Where am I?

The skeleton of a house showed half-hidden behind a neglected hedge which had been invaded by shiny-leaved sumachs. There was a crazy little gate with a loop of wire for latch. François opened it.

A clump of shrubs rose from the ground like a tumulus. In the middle was a quivering tamarisk ringed in by innumerable plants with leaves as hairy as the ears of animals. A bell-rope hung against the brick wall. There was a name on an enamelled plate: "La Joyeuse". A little daylight was still visible at the far end of the paddock which closed the view, a delicate and sickly gleam. François bent down and picked up a fallen apple. It was hard, and sour to the taste, and he hurled it with all his might at an attic window. The glass splintered.

What a country! *my* country!

But who was he to complain?—after all, he had chosen to make this trip. No one had compelled him to visit this countryside which was gently closing in about his childhood, showing the marks of age upon its tree-trunks, and hiding under a jungle of ivy and wild weeds a deserted village of which nothing now remained but a few stones. The street was made up of odds and ends of slate and tile and even scraps of marble mantelpieces.

If I'd known, I'd have gone on to Sainte-Veyres.

François remembered that the war had passed this way, staying in it for a few hours, being in no hurry to move faster, a tiny fragment of war. The plunder must have been but meagre in this kingdom of brambles and hemlock.

Papa never told me a word of all this. He still has something of the '14 heroism. What more could a bomb do to the house than kill the boredom seeping from it?

The cigarette which François held between his lips had gone flabby and smelt bad. He threw it on the ground. What could have induced him to leave the main road, and, especially, to have left Juliette and Paris where the seasons show only mild, respectable faces, where mud does not cling to the soles of one's shoes! He cursed himself for coming here to wander round a chilly ruin with nothing to recommend it.

And all just to pay papa a visit.

He grew suddenly aware of a scratching sound which seemed to come from an enormous hole which was all that remained of a caved-in cellar. He approached the spot and peered into the cavity. There

was a faint light at the bottom of it, and a number of moving shadows.

"What are you doing down there?"

There was a sound of whispering, a faint commotion, then silence. They must be watching him. He said again:

"What are you doing down there?"

"Looking for winkles!"

There was a burst of boyish laughter. The light went out, then on again. A strange whiff of herb-tea filled the garden: it came from leaves made sodden by the rain; an ancient and funereal smell.

"Don't muck about with the lamp, Jacquot!"

"Isn't it time you were going home?"

A shrill, hard voice answered him: "You come to spy on us? When we get back we'll say we've seen a no-good hanging around."

The noise of a pick-axe reached his ears. "Over here—not there—I tell you! . . . Can't you remember that the ground sounded hollower over by the bottles, you bone-head!"

The rain had stopped, but clothes, branches, stones were all saturated. An enormous drop of water kept falling at regular intervals from a ledge:

"Which way do I go for Sainte-Veyres?"

"Ask me another! If you're just out for a chat, you'd better think again: nothing doing!"

François wanted to clamber down into the hole and explain his presence to the boys, but he could see no steps. They must have brought a ladder with them and then moved it away. He remembered the frantic desire he used to feel to climb all the ladders in the

house. I loved seeing from above the rooms in which I lived. How thrilled I was when Angèle decided to clean the ceiling chandelier in the drawing room, a sort of geyser in crystal. I held the steps for her, and oh! what dreams I dreamed! I imagined myself to be at last in contact with the sky. I had read a wonderful story about a giant beanstalk which shot up in a single night until it reached to paradise. Slyly I waited until Angèle should come down, then climbed in my turn, and shut my eyes. One day papa surprised me in this situation. I dared not descend. I looked down upon his thick head of hair with its side-parting, and the gesture filled me with terror, for I suddenly realized that I was in danger. That was all he wanted. I clambered down in tears from my corner of paradise, and stood before my judge. In a freezing voice he said: "You might have hurt yourself badly. It is not as easy as you seem to think to climb over other people's heads." Thus it was that the ladder became for me an object of desire, symbol of a world which I could never reach. My father did not like us to raise our eyes; we had to keep them perpetually lowered. . . . There was that business, too, of the ladder and the cherry-tree! They had been looking for me for several hours, and all the while I had been hiding up there in the dense foliage with its clusters of succulent and forbidden fruit. I had sworn to myself that I would never come down. But when darkness came, cold took possession of my tree. The fruit lost its splendour and its glow. The remains of a bird which had been suspended between two branches to keep the crows

away, filled me with terror. What once had been my faithful companion had become a hostile presence. I had entered the world of death and immobility. Then the wind rose, and the wings, which had been secured with a length of thread, grew taut and made a melancholy sound as though the bird were trying to escape from its leafy prison. It dawned on me that one could never find happiness in oneself. That was my father's cunning victory, the hard lesson taught me by a creaking night of May. . . . Then, there was that time when I crashed down on to the glasshouse roof from the top of a step-ladder which had been left unguarded, and looked at the broken fragments all round me without fully realizing what had happened. When they picked me up my legs were covered in blood. I suddenly grew afraid of all around me that seemed sharp, bottle-ends at which I could not look without feeling sick. It was then that I became suspicious of my dreams which all ended in this way, I being my own executioner.

"Shove off! you're taking all the air!"

A sudden fury took hold of François at the thought that he was being kept at bay by this aggressive gang.

"Just you wait till I come down, you wretched little cave-dwellers!"

"Come down, then."

"I'm from the police."

"And we're from the main-drain!"

The laughter started again, louder this time. The subterranean labours continued. One of the boys

must have been wielding his pick-axe with a will, to judge by the encouraging noises made by his companions.

"Joking apart. Which way ought I to take for Sainte-Veyres?"

A resounding "shit!" was the only reply he got. The handle had come off the young navvy's pick-axe.

"Why don't you look what you're doing, you ass!"

"I struck rock."

"Not much to choose between your head and a lump of stone!"

François, in his most beguiling tones, called out:

"Wouldn't you like me to come down and give you a hand?"

The kids shone their pocket torch in his face.

"Thought you'd 've looked a bit older. Road to Sainte-Veyres?—straight ahead, but it's every bit of two miles. Keep your eyes skinned: there's a lot of side-roads. Turn where there's an arrow chalked on the road. It's for the Sunday race. But don't follow the arrow or you'll land up at Jouy. Know that dump?"

"Not very well."

François was suddenly surprised by the kindness of these youngsters. He thanked them.

"Like a cigarette?"

"Wouldn't say no."

Already one of the boys was behind him, his pull-over draped over his bottom with the sleeves knotted round his middle. It must be pretty warm down in that den.

"How did you get up?"

The urchin did not answer the question, but held out his hand to claim his due.

"Three fags—that'll be enough."

François gave them to him: his hand was shaking.

"You frightened?"

"No, only cold."

"Not like us: luckily we're a crowd; no reason for us to be scared."

The youngster obviously wanted to talk. "This isn't exactly camping weather. We were at a holiday camp close to the sea, in the summer: on an estuary. An estuary's just like the sea. But, ooh! didn't it half niff!—and when you wanted to bathe you had to cut a path through the reeds!"

François had never had that kind of adventure in the old days. Papa used to talk of the sea as he might have talked of loose women. Always the same old story—the sea coming in as fast as a galloping horse—he used to tell them—and, before you could say Jack Robinson, nothing there, no more sand, no trace of laggard loiterers. He used to recount the trip he had made to Mont-Saint-Michel, and describe the tide sweeping in like a bore. I couldn't sleep for thinking of it. The ocean, for me, took on the very face of punishment, the cruel features of an executioner from whom there could be no hope of reprieve. Ah! that Mont-Saint-Michel which an unleashed and watery violence was seeking to devour. Papa was already making ready to sow a deep suspicion in our minds of even the most harmless of country scenes, seeing to it that we should never close our eyes in sleep upon the bright vision of golden holidays. Many

and many a time, in my broken slumbers, did the sea surge right up to Sainte-Veyres, the waves beating furiously against the walls of our home. I watched papa directing strange operations, steering the house towards the forest, mooring it to the oldest walnut he could find. And when, in the deep of night, I went along to the lavatory, I would sometimes run into my father, always fully dressed and prepared for any eventuality, or so I thought. Very quietly I would ask him—"Anyhow, papa, the house is solid, isn't it?" Then he would assume his most severe expression and say, in a tone of deep solemnity: "Go back to bed, my boy: I am watching, and all our dead are watching, too."

"Don't know whether we'll ever get our hands on it."

The urchin turned his beret round on his head. It was too large for him, and looked swollen like a cream-puff. One of his calves was bleeding. He had licked a finger and was rubbing away the caked blood from the edges of the cut.

"Don't want to spoil my sock."

"Are you and your pals looking for something?"

"You never know."

"Treasure, perhaps?"

"How did you find out?"

François made no reply. He did not want to destroy the mysterious implications of his question. Just by chance he had scored a hit. He, too, had once gone treasure-hunting, with dogged persistence and his sister. I had dug a hole close to the well, at a spot where there was a natural grotto half hidden under

some bracken which still showed green, an acid, rainy green. Papa caught us at it. We could never escape from his shadow. He was white with anger, and his voice had a cutting edge. "Fill up that hole! fill it up, I tell you! . . . You'd like to know what there is down there, wouldn't you? Well, I'll tell you: the dead, nothing but the dead, your mother first and foremost." I ran off with my sister Adrienne. We never again dared to set our feet upon that piece of ground, so terrified were we of striking against—I don't know what, my mother's elbow, perhaps, or my grandfather's projecting jaw, which used to produce a long and frightening whistle whenever he kissed us. For days after that we were afraid to play. We spent our time in a yard paved with concrete, or on the tiled floor of the kitchen. The earth was a forbidden place, the sky, too, which had become a prohibited area, a place reserved for wandering souls, for bad weather, for cataclysms. I remember the sound of hail rattling on the roof. The whole house reverberated with the noise which was like that of a gigantic kettle-drum. The hailstones broke the windows, and jumped about in the attic. The ceilings trembled as though feet were tramping over-head. Papa used to make us go out and watch the volleying musketry of heaven. The hailstones struck us on the head and we cried out, while he, under an umbrella, stood muttering prayers. Angèle was loud in her complaints, but papa never stirred. Finally, he sort of hissed at us: "Go back indoors, children. You have had your baptism of fire. Hail does not kill, storms do not kill, only sins kill." Ever after

that day, I looked upon the sky as an uninhabited region, and sometimes fancied that it was some enormous workshop where calamities were in process of manufacture, wars, and, perhaps, papa's anger.

The urchin twitched François's sleeve.

"You haven't answered my question." Then, since François seemed to be lost in thought, he added: "It was the militia hid the treasure. They were quartered here. Were you a militiaman?"

François replied abruptly:

"I was nothing during the war."

"Rommel came here. There were enormous meals, with turkey, which went on all night. It was my elder brother who told us that the soldiers had buried some treasure in the garden. My mother said I was to go and look. But others got there before us."

There was a shout from the bottom of the cellar:

"Haven't you done talking to that chap? Stow it!"

The boy put the cigarettes in his pocket.

"It's getting parky. You looking for work?"

"You bet I am."

"Come back in a few days. If we've found any gold you shall have your whack."

"How old are you?"

"Ten."

Then, after a moment's silence, with a scornful note in his voice, he added:

"'s a matter of fact, I'm rising eleven. So long! Straight on for Sainte-Veyres, but keep a good lookout for the white arrow."

The boy limped away. The sound of pick-axes at work had begun again, but more violently and with

longer intervals between each stroke. François walked back through the tangled garden where the rain had turned the ground to slush. He wiped his shoes on the thick grass growing by the roadside, and resumed his way.



The road lay through a large forest where the trees were widely spaced. Clumps of glossy chestnuts bordered it. The wind played freely over its extent, and a thousand eddies made of it a living, inhabited, but inhospitable place. Stunted oaks trailed a draggle of leaves which humidity had turned to a sickly white.

François had never liked woods. I remember once finding myself confronted by a single tree which obstructed the path along which I was walking. It had been long dead, and the branches had silently broken off, though nobody knew why, nor under what weight they had collapsed. The top had already fallen, and only the lowest boughs remained, which spread dangerously from the trunk. I stopped, and dared not pass it. It was precisely as though that tree were denying me entry to my father's house towards which I was going. There was an enormous ant-heap at its foot. I thrust a piece of wood into the crawling mass, and felt suddenly afraid that the ants, in an eager, serried column, might clamber up the stick and make for my face. That tiny pyramid, all alert and watchful, seething under scraps and rags of bark, held me rooted to the spot. I have never, since that day, been able

to remain for long with anyone or anything. In every human being I encounter, I always see, like a watermark behind the skin, that dead tree with the swarming hillock at its foot, keeping me from making contact with his real self. Fortunately there is still Juliette, minus tree and minus ants, Juliette who has bred in me a horror of my childhood. There is leaven in her body. That, too, is why I can never read novels. Their authors do not recreate life, but counterfeit it, and their pens are dipped in death. Once, when I had shown Juliette something I was writing, I spoke of this. For several nights she could not sleep. "Your writing is a way of leaving me," she kept on saying. Since I began to love her, I have been writing better. I will tell her that, on her birthday, with my lips pressed to hers.

There had been another dead tree, but this time not split like the one he had come upon in his childhood. A covering of fleshy moss gave it a respectable appearance. It looked like a piece of old furniture. I stumbled over a root, and fell. When I opened my eyes a man with a gun was smiling down at me. "I swear I wasn't trying to kill you," he said. "It went off accidentally." It was that had made a sound of whistling in my ears, as though the tree was angry. I never believed the man's explanation. It was the tree that had fired at me.

After rounding the tree, François found himself walking down a majestic avenue. It must, he thought, lead to a park, because he had to step over a heavy chain which spanned it. Beeches with autumn-nibbled leaves stood along the road and made a vaulted roof

above it. Some hundreds of yards further on he debouched upon a heathy waste. Men had been cutting wood there, and the trunks of trees still lay upon the ground, their foliage withered. He had to step over one of these which lay across the road. Coarse grass grew all round, out-topping the log.

The silence, scored with the sounds of falling acorns or a few dead leaves, gave him an uncomfortable feeling.

This place'll certainly be the death of me. Then, suddenly, he heard something moving quickly. It must be a wild animal! Where would it break from cover? But once again silence fell. Leaves fluttered down upon him as he walked. The bottoms of his trousers were already soaked, and he could feel the water seeping through the stuff. The sound of quick movement came again, like silk being torn, accompanied by a noise of galloping. Beside the road a little fire was smouldering. It was comforting to have a smoky flame for company in the absence of a human fellow-traveller. About him was the smell of rotting wood. The twigs under the expiring fire creaked and crackled. There was a little heap of glowing wood-ash, but nobody was near. An old haversack lay upon the ground. Soon the wood began again, but denser than before.

He must press on through the oncoming of darkness, though a little light still lingered. The forest lay like a weight upon his back. He turned up the collar of his wind-cheater. What a nonsensical idea it had been to play this wretched "return of the prodigal" game! How much better it would have been to

continue on by train to Sainte-Veyres, and, if there had been nobody to meet him, to have taken the only taxi. He could have driven comfortably along the rutted roads to the front-door of his father's house. But he had wanted to make acquaintance, at long last, with the country which lay about it and had always been for him a secret world, a place of mystery, a no-man's-land of scrub and bracken and woodlands half consumed by time, into which his father had forbidden him to venture when he was a child. He had felt an urgent need to "place" the wild and lonely house in its natural setting; to restore to it a quiet rural scene, a sky of peaceful blue, a girdle of fields preyed upon by rooks and the spiral flight of starlings. My father has quite possibly forgotten that I shall be thirty to-morrow. How long is it since I was last here? The time I came when Ludovic was born. What a sinister affair that was! A child whom nobody could dote on. Why, even the mother had been made apprehensive by the tiny face from which the wrinkles would not vanish, by the hair which fell out almost as soon as it had grown, by the little body which she dared not touch with her lips, for fear of doing it a hurt. I was truly fond of Simone, my foster-sister. I agreed to stand godfather. But why did they pick on me? They could have found plenty of men in the village who would have enjoyed playing the part of godfather. Poor kid! Things went wrong from the very first. He was baptized, almost by stealth, between two bouts of illness. The father had been afraid that the holy water might strike with excessive coldness on his son's too bulbous forehead.

He had asked for it to be warmed. The priest had made a scene. "Holy water"—he loudly exclaimed—"never killed anybody." Ludovic stood up to the ceremony well, which is more than could be said of me. The guests were all taken ill. What a meal! My father refused to be present "on account of his being in mourning". Poor mamma, hovering like a bird of evil omen above the banquet. For fifteen years papa had made the very most of her death. He used it as a screen behind which to conceal his own mysterious life. No one ever dared to sing when dinner was over. In those days I was working for one of those strange examinations which reward successful candidates with Civil Service jobs in Paris. I was taking a correspondence course. When I presented myself for the final test, I found that I had been sweating blood over subjects which were not of the slightest use to me. There was one vacancy for every hundred candidates. I vanished on the second day. I knew that my father had been paying my fees by instalments, on the ground that he was overwhelmed with money troubles. Is papa rich? I have no idea, not the foggiest. His contribution to the baptismal feast was some game that had gone rather too high. Mine, was some sweets which the grocer had been keeping for some time in a glass jar. The almonds were all shrivelled inside the sugar coating which no longer melted in the mouth. Oh! what a meal!—and it began all over again in the evening. The same food appeared for the second time under a thick layer of mayonnaise. It was on that occasion that I first fell in love. I had next to me a young girl who was learning shorthand and

typewriting. She had a "Paris way with her", as the phrase went. She was wearing a ball-dress, though why, Heaven alone knows! I had never before seen a woman's shoulders at such close range. She told me all about a trip she had made to the Riviera for some typewriting championship or other. Suddenly I found myself living in a world of human flesh confined within the soft movement of bare shoulders. I looked at her rather heavy breasts, at her carefully done hair, at her little rounded lower lip which occasionally became distended in a burst of unrestrained laughter. When dessert came on, she gave me a kiss, and I ran away that I might keep unsullied on my mouth the burning imprint of her lips. Why, I refused even to wash, even to eat, so determined was I to keep that kiss intact! . . . I hid my mouth behind my hand—but the affair did not last. My father found out about it, and treated me to a description of WOMAN which made me burst into sobs. What a scene! It was as though he were taking his revenge, either upon my mother, or upon some other woman whom he could not forget. Then, I remember, he assumed that astonishing "misery look" of his, and said to me with unaccustomed and degrading gentleness: "Never forget your mother: it is she who should be the object of your filial, your secret love. Any temptation by which you may be assailed will be made worse by the fact that your mother has taken us away with her, once and for all, to Heaven." For the first time I stood up to him. I repeated several times in succession—"no, no, no". I took refuge in my bedroom and wrote my first love letter—to my table companion. She

never got it. My father indulged in squalid spying. But enough of that. A few months after the christening I bought Ludovic a Meccano set, without consulting anybody. It was pointed out to me that he was a bit young for such a present. In the following year I confined my godfatherly activities to sending him a card with a figure of Father Christmas in red spangles. Then I forgot Ludovic altogether. He must be going to school now. I'll give him a satchel with a strap to go over his shoulder. That's the kind of thing little boys love. Yes, that makes it some time since I last paid a visit to my father—that larger-than-life widower. Poor mamma. I never knew her except monstrously linked with death. Papa had shut her, enshrined her, within an inaccessible reliquary of grief, as in a prison. No one was allowed to evoke her memory. It was he who gave the starting signal for tears or sighs to all the family. That death was his own personal property. He alone was master of the grief which lay heavy upon the house, encircled it and crushed it—a model in its kind! Oh, those aggressive black gloves of his! Mamma did not deserve such an orgy of grief! I know that she lived modestly within the bounds of happiness, a withdrawn and self-effacing figure, and that when she died papa made her live again in an incredible pomp of mourning black. She must no longer be allowed, all frail and ardent, to be resurrected in our memories, as she had truly been. He kept her confined beneath a giant catafalque, and would not let her come back to us treading the gentle road on which she had moved. She was for us only a presence decked with silence and tears, a black

and shrouded idol which papa brought out once a year like those Spanish images of the Virgin, in the austere light of candles under a November sky. He had torn her from our fevered grasp, and kept her, cold as a marble statue, under a veil of words.

François, more than once, spoke aloud the word "mamma", but did not long continue this dangerous game of which his father disapproved. Tears, when he did so, came into his eyes, and these he could not conceal from his father, the official controller of the family sobs.

A dog had put in an appearance, and was there now at his side, watching him attentively. It was a *café-au-lait* mongrel, with asymmetrical ears, heavy hind-quarters and short legs. The cold feel of its nose in the palm of his hand had roused him from his brooding fit. He found himself sitting on a smooth-barked tree-trunk. Just the sort of dog for my father, a dog that makes no attempt to hide its farmyard pedigree. François continued on his way, but the mud was sticky and clinging. He had to walk with his legs straddled, one foot on each of the grassy verges. Movement was becoming difficult.

"Hungry?"

The dog whimpered, and the beginnings of a bark seemed to be rumbling for a longish while deep in its throat.

"Hungry?"

The dog fell silent, wagging its tail.

"Either clear off, or kindly inform me whether this is the road to Sainte-Veyres."

The tone of his voice clearly pleased the dog, which emitted a very gentle growl.

"Good! mezzo-soprano!"

François tried the animal with all the canine names he could think of—Médor, Kim, Rango, Duc, etc. . . . The creature followed at his heels, then disappeared into a bush, only to return with a submissive air. The woods gave off a sort of lead-pencil smell which François sniffed with considerable surprise.

"That's enough—off with you now, back to your master's house—like me."

But the dog would not leave him. It sniffed at his shoes, jumped up against his legs rather half-heartedly, and finally slunk away.

The road had now become wider, and was beginning to look like a frequented highway. It was seamed with two deep ruts. Oh! if only he could get away from this forest which stretched ahead like a cold, damp tongue. As he moved forward he was conscious of a sharper tang in the air. The open country could not be far off. The dog was still following, but had now been joined by another animal, black in colour and with pendent dugs. François remembered that the ruined village which he had just left had been abandoned by its inhabitants. Angèle, the old servant, an untamed and surly creature, had come from these parts. On her first day in the house she had been found to be covered with lice. She had had to be taught how to wash herself. My sister gave her a coral necklace which she kept hidden away under her mattress with other objects. One Sunday she went out

in a flowered dress and with her arms bare. But this get-up seemed to terrify her, and she very soon resumed her black orphans' garb. She ate her meat like an animal, gnawing along the bone. When she sang the sound was so delightful that I was filled with love of her. Her presence in our midst brought a sense of reassurance. She did the most complicated things quite simply. Then a day came when she went back to her village because she could not live without the sound of grunting animals at night. She could not sleep in her room because the partitions let through too much noise, and there was something about papa which made her avoid him. Whenever she met him in one of the passages she slid away from him like a shadow. He could not bear anyone to be speechless in his presence, shut away in a personal silence in which he played no part. Angèle had the dumbness of growing trees, the calmness of the vegetable world waiting for the fall of night. My father was not a man to find any advantage in waiting.

Then came the war. The village drew to it a number of Bavarian troops, then several commandos which never seemed to break up or disperse in this peaceful countryside. They sucked the place dry. After the war the water supply had vanished. The great underground sheet of water, a thing of the utmost concern to the villagers, had suddenly dried up without any warning. Growing plants and animals had gasped to death. The mobile tank-cars, requisitioned by the Sub-Prefecture, got thoroughly sick of the village's never-ceasing thirst. Relief by this means could be only temporary. The authorities were

not equipped to deal with disasters which outlasted their legal term. The few remaining inhabitants who had gone to earth in the ruins of their homes, packed their bags, put their mattresses and bolsters on top of the already overloaded wagons, and made off. A day came when the village was deserted. I read about it in the papers. Only a few dogs and cats remained behind, skulking in the doorways of the abandoned dwellings . . . that was all.

François quickened his pace, terrified at the thought of having to traverse this zone which had been left to the mercy of animals that had once been domesticated. One of them, gone wild, might bite him. At his heels, anxious not to lose touch, the dog and the bitch were trotting in pursuit. A layer of clinging mist was moving slowly.

If I told this story in Paris everyone would laugh at me. Juliette would find the scene highly romantic. I ought to have brought her with me. She's a wonderful hand at dealing with invisible dangers, muffled sounds, muted nightmares. There is a deep deposit of fear in me, inherited from my father. He always manages to get on the track of distress, like a water-diviner. He has the gift of making gloom flourish in the space of a few minutes, as damp produces weeds. He is past-master of the funereal. He was the village master of ceremonies, a sort of director of mortuary operations. He set the "tone". But it's time I stopped thinking of all that. I feel the upsurge of an old exasperation, and it puts me in a bad mood for this unexpected return to the family hearth. Better leave my father where he is. I shall have more

than enough time in which to repatriate him in the land of my remembered childhood, like one of those Sovereigns called back from exile because his former subjects cannot live without anointings and coronations, ceremonies and festivals which have no rhyme nor reason. I and Juliette were living so happily without my father. He was like a god left forgotten in a temple. He could strike fear only into the curious admitted into the holy of holies to look at him. I was beginning to amass memories in which he played no part, no longer made to tremble by the mere fact of his presence, and pestered by his every movement. The future for me had become immaculate, beyond the stretch of his enormous shadow. Is he going to come back now, and occupy once more a place when I had almost forgotten him? Is he going to get his claws into me again?

In a year's time I shall marry Juliette. She wants to ask only our real friends on that occasion, not those who merely eat us out of hearth and home. The month and the day have been settled. Perhaps between now and then papa will have taken his leave of us—not that any ailment could ever put up for long a successful fight against that great frame of his. No matter what the season, he moved through it with the same steady step, the same undiminished eyesight, wearing always the same black serge suit. We have got plans for the Sainte-Veyres house. Juliette scarcely knows it. One day I drove her past the place, and we picnicked not far off, rather furtively. She took a good look at the garden through the field-glasses. But we did not stay long. I found the game odious.

There was a morning, too, when I settled her up in a fir tree, so that she might get a good view of the somewhat austere walls of the house with their unobtrusive windows. She was enchanted with the circular one over the front-door. I wouldn't let her go and ring the bell. I'll tell them I've lost my way, that I'm a good friend of Monsieur François, that I live on my own, that I'm—let me think—yes, that I'm a dress-designer and do the drawings for the fashion magazines. "No, Monsieur, the folds don't present any difficulty: they're always the same for the front and the arms. I could do them with my eyes shut." François had led Juliette away from the old-fashioned garden with the untrimmed trees which had been allowed to grow too tall. "Which was your favourite corner? Where was it you tried to strangle your sister? Was it your mother who had that Lourdes grotto built over there, by the shrubbery? . . ."

François stopped: he had a stitch in his side. The layer of mist was moving softly through the trees. Ahead, the road continued between fields. The moon was up and shed a diffused light over the gently undulating countryside. There were now three animals silently following him. A dumpy little cat with ragged ears had slipped in between the dog and the bitch. François had nothing to give them, not even a scrap of bread. He felt in his pockets, but all he could find was two peppermint drops and half a peanut. They formed the total contents of his larder. He, too, was hungry. When I get to papa's, I'll pinch some preserved fruit: the cellar's full of the stuff. When I was

there last I even found an earthenware pot which had had eggs in it for years. I was sufficiently curious to break one: it exuded a thick, black liquid. There was a whole shelf of jam which had gone the colour of amber. I'm hungry, no doubt about it. Clear off, you animals! the place I'm going to is not for the likes of you, nor of me, neither, if it comes to that. I only hope my worthy sister Adrienne is there! She has the most wonderful collection of conversational subjects, all of which have been tried out in the smoky old drawing-room. I wonder if she's still got that scar on her knee I gave her? If only she were there without her husband! But will she have been warned of this sudden family get-together? What ever induced her to marry a regular officer! I bet he seduced her! It must have been easy enough to abduct an only too willing young woman from our front-doorstep. Any tramp could have done it. She'd been lovelorn for years, and all to no purpose, as was obvious from the expression of her pink-and-white face and her prominent eyes. "Look out!"—I used to say to her: "if you aren't careful you'll lose those eyes of yours, they'll just roll out like marbles." She was a bit on the solemn side. She had heavy features and coarse nostrils. My father would never allow her to have a "perm", so she wore her hair in two great coils round her ears. Poor girl!

I caught them both out, once. She was going to the room of the young soldier-man who had a head like an egg—a soft-boiled egg! . . . It needed only the tap of a knife-edge on the side of his skull, and the top would have come away like a piece of shell.

And oh! that rich brown hair of his!—just the colour of a cake when it's newly baked. He didn't talk much about the '40 war, and when he did, only very modestly. That wasn't *his* war—didn't satisfy him. It was the other he was interested in, the '14 affair. His father had been through it, and his family had poured out a magnificent tribute of blood in its service—brothers, cousins, uncles, etc. . . . *His* family wasn't on speaking terms with the dead of '39-'45.

There weren't many opportunities for a serious-minded and romantic young woman at Sainte-Veyres, and what enchanted papa was that this dashing officer never failed to attend the obsequies of any half-pay General that might be going. He kept his head bowed through the whole of his own wedding. He smiled once, but only to please the photographer, and to reassure his wife who was constantly on the watch for some flicker of contentment on his face. For a year now they have been playing bridge at Poitiers between parades and scamped washing-up. In short, a married pair whose hearts beat as one over a "three no-trumps". Poor little sister, eaten alive! Our father had kneaded her from too light a dough.

The moonlight was working through the woof of the night. François came to a halt, and the animals circled round his legs. The cat rippled her tail in a coquettish manner. The bitch and the dog began mumbling one another's chops. They seemed to be happy and carefree. . . . Always looking for a master; can't you be content with being free in a world which keeps me in slavery? You can choose your own family. There's no office waiting for you, and your only pre-

occupations are love and food. . . . If I were in your place I should think of nothing but eating and drinking my fill. Do you really find the smell of a man so delicious? What does a man smell of?—old tools, rotten wood, dried weeds, shell-fish, stale bread? Is it so indispensable a smell? I can do very well without animals like you. Have you ever smelt my father? He must smell of skin that's been washed too often, skin that's too smooth—skin that retains nothing, not even the sniff of an onion—skin that's proof against all contacts. Come to think of it though, when he's ill he probably smells of over-cooked cauliflower, or, perhaps, astringent aspirin would be nearer the mark.

Suddenly François set off at a run down the road which swung downhill round a corner. But the animals still stuck to him with a growl or a miaul. They hurried after him solemnly, their noses close to the ground. He came upon a farm with projecting eaves. The squat, round dovecote resembled the tower of a feudal castle. A great gate with a lightly arched roof gave access to the yard. The place might have been an ancient lazarus-house. Where could he knock and enquire his way? At which of the shutters? He turned round: the animals had disappeared: this must be some invisible frontier, known only to them, which they dared not cross. War and death meant nothing to them and could not destroy the incredible loyalty bred of their first meeting with human beings.

The muddy yard was paved with large flat stones, and smaller stones imperfectly joined. Long trails of rotting straw, giving off an acrid smell, led to the different entries. François slipped on them as he

might have done on seaweed. He reached a door in the main part of the building, which must serve the purpose of a dwelling-house. There was a pile of clogs on the doorstep. Puny geraniums in old enamelled cooking-pots adorned the entrance. The moon was reflected in a small overgrown pond at no great distance.

"Is anyone there? I want to ask my way. Is anyone there?"

The house was evidently locked and bolted and wrapped in sleep. No doubt the farmer and his people had to be up early. Why had he followed the directions given him by the boys? They must have indicated a short cut which only local folk could find. He went back to the outer porch and stared at the road. It seemed to him to carry past the fence, swing round a clump of oaks, then lose itself in lush grassland smelling of trodden stalks and corn. Should he retrace his steps? He dared not start over again on that tramp through the wood, with the animals at his heels. No doubt they were hanging round in the hope of attaching themselves to some other casual wayfarer, some potential master. No, that just wasn't possible. What time was it? Hell! my watch has stopped, I told Juliette not to wear it on her wrist. She plays the devil with watches: moves her hands about too much. Same as with his fountain-pen. Ever since she wrote that ridiculous letter to one of the papers, hoping to win a competition for the "Best Letter of Despair", the gold nib has been broken and the ink doesn't flow. It wasn't used to the pompous phraseology of Partings. She doesn't know anything about despair, but

she loves competitions. There was that ridiculous quiz on the radio at which she won a flat-iron as heavy as a tank, which needed an athlete to move it over the linen. She had answered, in perfect good faith, a number of crafty questions, put by knowing examiners, on the subject of secret affinities, a sort of dress-rehearsal for the Last Judgement. It was I who wrote that letter for her, the letter of "parting". How we laughed over it! "How do you come to know so much about it?" she asked me with obvious uneasiness. I told her that I liked writing down everything that came into my mind. "*Does everything come into your mind?*" she said: "do you already know what to say when you want to leave me?"

The end of the letter was a bit scamped. Those were the days when our love was still a delicate growth, a bit like playing at love: we were afraid of launching out on what lay ahead.

It was the sight of her small face looking at me from a hospital bed (she had had an accident) which made the final bond between us. A cyclist coming too fast down a hill had knocked her over. I shall never forget her damp hair on the pillow, still smelling of the street, of rain, of recent sweat. For the first time we shared a silence that was filled with hope. There are dramas, I am certain of it, which bring us help, dramas which bring not destruction, but a guarantee of how much there is to live for, dramas which keep happiness intact. Do you remember, Juliette, how hard I had to work to produce a smile?

François was suddenly seized by a hideous and

wholly unjustified fear that he would never manage to get back. These early hours of the night were weighing so heavily on him that he stood stock-still, like a sentry, in front of the silent farm. Why were no dogs barking?—and what were the cocks up to?

After all, what is there for me to do, or look for, in my father's house? I left Juliette complaining of a cold feeling in her back. A bad sign that. I bet she's lying in bed at this very moment not knowing how to get in touch with me. I hope to Heaven she's been sensible enough to call in a doctor! I know her so well: as likely as not she's let the concierge treat her with some concoction of wild-flowers or vegetables . . . perhaps poultice her sore throat with boiled carrots. . . . One can catch a doctor as quickly as a microbe. I ought to have fixed a draught-excluder round the window. She's got such an extraordinarily sensitive throat: the tiniest midge will set up an irritation. I wonder whether you've thought of telephoning my father, or of getting somebody to telephone for you. "Tell him I'm not at all well, but that there's nothing to worry about. Say I'm in good hands. The stay-maker upstairs is looking after me, and her husband is making me hot drinks." What! that drunken fool! Juliette, I beg of you to wait till I'm with you before going sick. I've lost my way—and I'm reminded of our first meeting. Who but you would have spoken to me on a public bench? "Your muffler, monsieur." "Thank you, madame—mademoiselle. There's a chill in the air, and in life, too. It's awfully shut in here, don't you think?" The solid city square. Then I asked the

way to some street or other—it didn't matter which. The rue Servandoni, monsieur?—it's quite close. I might equally well have said the rue Gambetta or the Avenue Victor-Hugo. It'll be months before the trees show any leaves. . . . What about something hot to drink? Then you opened the front of your coat, and I saw your body all snuggled up under the material, ready for warmth, ready for love. Let me offer you a cup of coffee. Two workmen were talking close by. My little aside was greeted with a laugh. "Brain having a lay-down, eh?" You, it appeared, were waiting for a girl-friend: so was I. But that was all make-believe. Actually, you had missed your suburban train. We had all the time in the world ahead of us, a funny sort of time which made us blush, talk too quickly, using words as tired and worn-out as we were ourselves: time accorded to us, in which there was no more delay possible, no more bashfulness, no more family: time to be taken advantage of, or left unused.

François noticed a long, twisted piece of wire hanging at the side of the porch. There must be a bell at its further end. He gave a tug to the handle. His guess had been right: it was a rusty bell-pull, like the one I had talked about as I walked beside you. "There's no longer any fun in going to see anybody: one just pushes a button and the door opens of itself. No one is waiting for you on the other side, no one is surprised at your coming."

That reminds me of other evenings. Evenings don't change: they are all of the same kind, damp, and smelling of bath-wraps. When I came back from

Nice two years ago, I could put up a great deal better with darkness than I can now. I had been working as a beach-attendant. It was my business to clean up the shore after the sun had gone down. I stacked the chairs, cleared away the dirty pieces of paper, collected all the odds and ends of lost property, came upon couples fast asleep. I was the Grand Master of the sands and waves, and I never slept until the early bathers put in an appearance. The sea was mine, and the sky. I have got used to things that don't belong to me, but this evening . . . fact is, I'm hungry: that's at the root of everything—I'm hungry. I can't exhibit my empty stomach and my empty pocket-book to my father, full to the brim as he is with grief and solitude. That'd be a bit too much. . . . He'd put me through a sort of casual cross-examination. . . . "I'm not asking anything of you, you're free to do as you will with the money which came to you from your mother, but don't forget that the money comes from a mother who paid dearly for having a son . . . a free gift . . . there, now, François, I've said it, and you must forgive me."

He kept on tugging at the bell-pull as though he wanted to waken not only this farm swallowed up in the darkness, but his father, too, and the whole family lying deep down in him, on the watch. But all to no purpose. Suppose I shout. It really is a bit much. What if I were ill? What if I were summoning help? What if somebody sprang on me from behind? . . . Who's there!

There was a shadow hiding in the corner of the wall.

"Who's there—speak, or I fire!"

Something was hopping about in the road: a bird, must be a magpie. It was trying to fly, but quickly dropped down on its feet, and remained motionless.

"Don't hurt it!"

A man came towards François, hesitatingly. He walked clumsily: probably his clogs were ill-fitting. He freed one of his feet and started to rub his leg with a handful of grass.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo—what do you want?"

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"I'm on my way home."

"D'you live in this farm?"

"Yes and no."

"You don't live in this farm?"

"That depends."

The man had laid a bundle on the ground, a shapeless object wrapped in oilskin. From his pocket he took a small metal box, and some cigarette paper. Very quietly he rolled a cigarette, moistened the paper with his tongue, put the cigarette in his mouth, and heaved a sigh.

"The last before turning in. Like to make one for yourself?"

"No, thanks."

The man seemed to be harmless enough. Difficult to tell his age. He was wearing a flat cap which looked as though it ought to have a stalk attached. François could just make out a heavy moustache.

"Who directed you to this place?"

"What place?"

François could make nothing of this peaceable but hostile apparition.

Some sort of a tough, I bet.

"I don't come from these parts."

"That's pretty obvious."

"I've lost my way: I'm trying to get to Sainte-Veyres."

"Oh sure: Sainte-Veyres. And the road to Sainte-Veyres passes this farm. I'm not saying a thing: you can do the talking."

"I've told you—I'm on my way to Sainte-Veyres."

"You poor mutt: can't you see that this road leads nowhere?"

"I must have gone wrong."

"'s that all you've got to say? Better keep your lies for somebody else."

"But I'm not lying."

"Why not tell the truth for a change? You've come along to set the place alight—isn't that it? Suppose I blow the gaff?"

François remained silent, watchful, his fist ready clenched. His rough-and-tumble existence had taught him that enemies might turn up out of nowhere, that the only way of dealing with them was not to show anger, but to get rid of them.

"Got your eye on the girl, eh?—had an eyeful of her saucy frock, eh? Doesn't mean a thing to me. But the girl at the post-office, now, I can do what I like with her. Sooner or later somebody will have the boss's little chit, if not me, then you, or somebody else. Point is, she'll 'get had. *I won't give you*

away. My name's Galoche—remember that, Galoche. I've been sacked from here: sacked, I ask you! I love the beasts, them as are on this farm, and I'm going to save them from this wretched dump: too good they are for them as lives on the place. Piston, the horse, he can't do without me. If I wasn't by, he'd croak, he would. Got quarters as smooth as satin—and his eye! You should see it! Not a woman for miles round with an eye like that! The beasts can't live in a filthy hole like this: they're all more or less wasting away. Can't do what *you* want with 'em; got to do what *they* want. All a question of how you talk to 'em, I give you *my* word. Beast that's been talked to wrong, why, it sticks out a mile. I swear to you as I've never talked rough to Piston, never."

François was wondering why the man was so voluble. Had he something to hide, someone, an accomplice perhaps, who was up to no good? He was enjoying his smoke, enjoying talking. His face was only occasionally visible in the glow of his cigarette. François noticed that he was wearing an ancient greatcoat with enormous lapels. Now and again he raised his shoulders as though this object of clothing were too heavy for him.

"You won't let on as I sleep at night with the beasts?"

"Won't let on? Haven't I told you I'm bound for Sainte-Veyres?"

"That's true. . . . I hops it as soon as it's light, when the others wake up. Piston gets all nervous like if I don't go to him. Likes dahlias, he does, and I take him a sackful . . . the sheep, too. . . . If you want

to doss down here, say so. But I'll blindfold you. Don't want you to see which way I go."

"No, thank you all the same. All I want is to get to Sainte-Veyres."

"If you've got out of jug I won't spill the beans, trust me!"

François was eager to get started again. "What's the time?"

"About half-past nine. I left the pub at closing-time. Not a very cheerful spot, the village. One spends a lot, and gets nothing for it."

François sighed, and stretched his arms leisurely, as though he were ready for bed.

"I must pull myself together—and get going for Sainte-Veyres. I suppose I shall have to go back the way I came?"

"That's right. If you follow the edge of the wood for five hundred yards, you'll find a turning off to the left. Take that. But keep a good look-out, because at night all roads seem alike. It's the first one you want."

"I'll manage: many thanks."

"There's a small road-maker's shanty: looks like some sort of a chapel. That's where you turn."

"Thanks again, and good night."

"Good night. If you're coming this way again, I'll stand you a drink. But watch your step: the boss's girl's looked after pretty strict. I took along a piano for her once, in a wagon. Her pa bought it in the town. Plays all the up-to-date tunes without a mistake, she does. You can reckernize all of 'em. Smart kid."

François was already some distance off. He walked like a tired man. He had heard the click of a jack-knife opening, but did not want to turn his head. The man had taken a large hunk of bread, and was cutting a slice from it. François started to whistle.

He was feeling that he had had about enough of walking at night. It did not promise well for his ultimate arrival at his father's house. The old man would be in his nightshirt, and would stifle a yawn between two well-spaced kisses. I ought to have brought Juliette along. She'd have given the place a touch of warmth, taken the stiffness out of papa, and thrown open the windows on to the garden where nothing ever grows now. The nettles have taken possession for good and all. I was so much better off in Paris. We'd have got some friends together to-morrow, and had a spree. I'm sure Gaston would have come along without his wife, just to bring me a present. He never lets on about that sort of thing to her: feels more free that way. Juliette would have laid in some of my favourite hors-d'oeuvres, stuffed olives, especially, and a slap-up meal with a roast chicken browned to a turn—all sent in. How else can she manage it? She leaves the office at midday, has to be back at two, and works on till six. We don't have a proper kitchen, and do all the cooking on a spirit-stove in the bathroom. The steam seeps through into the studio. It's like eating in a Turkish bath. Her brother gets quite annoyed when he comes to see us. "Really, one'd think that eating in your place is some out-of-the-ordinary activity!" And it's true. One's got to arrange things so's each dish gets its turn over the flame.

Ought the steak to be cooked before the beans?—all that sort of planning. A meal is just one long coming and going between the table in the studio and the stove in the bathroom. It's difficult to have anybody to dinner. Juliette eats standing up just so that she can keep an eye on things, as countrywomen used to do in the old days. I'd like to ask heaps of people, to play the host, uncork the bottles, and provide sumptuous sweet-courses. But I've got to do things simply, because of the folding table and the divan which, in spite of every effort to disguise it, is so obviously a bed with the marks on it of two bodies, living in very cramped quarters without fuss and without cruelty. Sometimes I bring Juliette flowers, just because it gives me pleasure. She becomes like a very young girl as soon as she's got flowers in her hands. They quite take her breath away. It's always: "For me?" How I do love answering, with the pride of a donor, "Who d'you think they're for?" That look she has of faint excitement is delightful. There's a sort of open-air expression on her face, as though she'd been out to pick them with her own hands. Her cheeks light up, her eyes sparkle and go dark with a little flame dancing in each pupil. "D'you like them?" I love it when she talks about my present all through the meal. I twist and turn the little vase in which the city flowers are standing in water, flowers whose tightly curled hearts one is never sure of seeing under the petals. As a rule we put them in a jam-jar. They fade very quickly with us. Juliette likes to have them close to her face. At Sainte-Veyres we were forbidden to cut the overblown and hostile roses

which sprawled all over the front of the house. Only "badly shaved" chrysanthemums were cultivated—for the cemetery. Juliette is a perfect marvel. She came into my life without a hint of coquetry, and almost as though she didn't know what she was about. Neither of us showed the least surprise, and neither of us tried to let the other in on secracies of long-standing. Let the past bury the past. Why impose on another what one can barely endure oneself? Why re-dream ancient nightmares? Our past is all before us. We each of us earn our living, and each have about the same salary—some three thousand francs. I work in a nice little business where everything runs smoothly. I arrive punctually: I leave punctually. I am never kept late over something that has to be done in a hurry. My employers are gentlemen, always ready to stand you a drink, and full of good stories. I wish I could remember some of 'em—they'd help to shorten the way.

François has gone off again. I've since learned that he lied to me when he went away the first time. His birthday is in September, the 30th. He told me he'd got two days' leave because his father was expecting him, and *at all costs* he mustn't disappoint him. "Our happiness is involved, darling," he said. It suits me all right: I'll spend these two days with my mother. She's done everything to make me come: there's a dress lying waiting for me on my bed. Why pretend that I'm *not* trembling at the thought of climbing the red-carpeted stairs, ringing at the oak front-door, and finding myself back again in all the old surroundings

which I've tried so hard to forget: the drawer with Fernand's letters. I must burn them as soon as I get there. But I can't be the cause of François's frustration. It went to my heart to see him from the window, looking so thin, wearing that everlasting wind-cheater of his, with a rucksack slung on his shoulders. I saw a little group of people laugh as he went by. Going camping at this time of year—who ever heard of such a thing! The flat's already getting chilly. How can we warm it? I'm terrified of gas. I can't help feeling that we've both been waiting for this moment to go and warm ourselves in the bosoms of our families, to collect enough heat to keep us going for the winter. François had a long letter from his father. I should so like to meet him . . . to sit beside the fire with his father!

That's a pleasure François wants to enjoy in secret. He must be at Sainte-Veyres by this time . . . hugs, the smell of good food cooking, the cousins asked in to meet him, a terrific spread, a grandmother, a gaggle of aunts, hanging on his lips. I expect he feels the need of his native sky, of that unadventurous countryside where a man need have no fear of growing old. François is taking a "comfort-cure", trotting round that tormented and unstable face of his to the great concern of all the domestic fairies. How can I tell him about my mother, her dolled-up, snappy little dogs, her flat with those endless lampshades? How can I go into raptures over those delicious little meals which she eats secretly in front of the life-size portrait of herself in oils by a man whom she has come to love only after he's dead?

We both of us have things which mustn't be talked about if our love is to continue, because neither of us must run the risk of being disappointed in the other. Oh! François, why did you have to go? Poor François, why can't we be happy as we are? . . . Hullo! hullo!—that you, mummy? Yes, I'm coming: be with you in time for dinner. I'll pick up the oysters on the way. What's that?—Fernand'll be there?

A

another crossroads!

François looked up at a signpost where, on a tin plaque, all the directions he needed must be inscribed. Impossible to read a thing. Rust had eaten away the letters. He was shivering in spite of his American-style wind-cheater. For all its heaviness it afforded no real protection. If only I could take back with me that old Pyrenean woollen cloak that hangs in the hall. It's a communal garment, and I don't suppose papa ever uses it now, just keeps it in the same old place, because he doesn't like anything to be "changed". Gosh! how cold I am!—almost as cold as when I threw myself into the water after escaping from home. To think that all that means absolutely nothing to me now! What a fathead I must have been to attach more importance to death than to life! Still, after all, everyone in our family has tried at some time or another quite seriously to put an end to himself. And that goes for Adrienne, and our old servant, too. As to father, he positively reeks of suicide. I can scarcely remember a meal when somebody didn't think the soup tasted odd! We were all convinced: our imaginations played freely over the question of poisons and their uses. I remember how, before my own attempt, poor Adrienne tried to asphyxiate herself in the bath-

room. I caught her with the gas-pipe under her nose. "What are you doing?" The gas was hissing. "Me?—nothing, only looking to see if the pipe was stopped up." I thought that a perfectly natural thing to be doing—saw no great difference between killing herself or clearing a gas-pipe. Every one of our gestures, in that atmosphere of pent-up emotion and drama, might perfectly well lead to sudden and secret death. I remember how we were always looking at one another, keyed up for unusual movements, unaccustomed silences, absences too much prolonged, as though our whole existence were being directed by Fate towards the final *dénouement* of death. We no longer lived at all, but wandered about in a sort of harsh and primitive atmosphere. That suicide of mine was a long time ago. I have developed a liking for water since the day when I had the horrible, stale taste of it on my lips. Nowadays, when I go bathing, at the seaside or in a river, it is my way of saluting the water, of giving it due recognition, of taking all danger from it, of dimming its glittering fascination, of turning it into something placid and harmless. I must tell papa about that first deep dive of mine—down to the bottom. Didn't he ever guess? They told him I had fallen in by accident . . . and about that fellow on the barge who tried to save me, and his wife who didn't. There they were, just over my head, calmly discussing my sad death. They were casting for fish, and bringing up men.

The fields merged into a blurred distance. The thin rain had started again. There was no strength in it. It powdered François's hair. An aeroplane flew low

overhead, then turned westward. Its lights were winking with a regular rhythm. François covered a further hundred yards, and found himself in a clump of thin poplars growing round a miniature pond. He could not make out, among the tufts of reeds, where precisely the water began. He approached it gingerly. A heavily flapping bird, in search of prey, started up from the grass, turned over his head, and disappeared. François disliked these hidden presences revealed by sudden flight, these hiding-places of birds and quivering wild life, the contracted leapings of a frog. What had he ever been taught except fear, fear which no argument could overcome, no courage resist? What had he ever been taught except not to bend under the hard fist of pain, to bare his back to the blow, to indulge in self-examination with his naked soul left incapable of making any answer? Every evening we used to sit in a circle, and papa would put questions to us in writing. We had to give him our answers in sealed envelopes, at the end of dinner, and he would comment upon them. We knew that, for our father, a day without sin was a day without remorse. He could not bear to see us offering to his distant and morose gaze faces glowing with the sun and the open air. What have you been doing to-day? Are you satisfied with yourselves? Have you seen darkness fall without some feeling of shame? We were given religious instruction of a quite extraordinary kind, checked and corrected by our father. The Devil figured in it far more prominently than God. What a hotch-potch of deviltries we had served up to us during those meals! Even the curé wasn't allowed to

play a part. My father had taken the gospel out of his hands, and treated us to a hypocritical course of instruction untouched by any refreshing breeze from the Sea of Galilee. I had agreed with Adrienne that we should make identical answers. We chose the same sin and juggled about with it as one might with dishes on a menu. "To-day, the sin of anger." We were not allowed to offer any explanation, but had to answer the paternal questions with a simple yes or no. To such an extent did we exhaust the possibilities of evil in our imaginations that now we don't any of us really know where we stand in regard to it. . . . All I know at the moment is that I'm wet through.

The headlights of a car glared in the distance at ground level. François stationed himself on the edge of the road and waited. I'm going to pretend I'm an injured man. He tied his handkerchief round his wrist, and stepped into the road, raising his arm. The car pulled up.

"Are you hurt?"

"I've had a fall, and rather think I've sprained my wrist. It's not serious."

A woman was driving. She was solidly ensconced in the driving-seat with her folded arms resting on the wheel. All that François could see of her was an enormous mass of burnished hair, and a long, peasant-woman's nose.

"Hop in: we're no more than a couple of hundred yards from where I live."

Seeing that François hesitated, she added: "That's it, over there in that clump of trees to the right."

François climbed into the car and settled himself in the back seat.

"You should have come in beside me. You'll have to be careful where you are: there's a sick dog and some packing-cases. Would you mind handing me my bag?"

François found that he was sitting on the bag. He held it out to her. Her asking for it was obviously a precautionary measure. It was stuffed with banknotes.

The car started off. The woman's driving showed signs of nerviness. She let in the clutch, as she had stopped, with a distinct jerk.

"Would you mind getting out, and taking this parcel with your good hand?"

She held out to him a packet wrapped in newspaper. There were bloodstains on the makeshift wrapping. Just as well to be prepared for anything in the darkness which had fallen like the blow of a fist on persons and objects. François was expecting a large château half buried in damp and intimidating greenery, a flight of steps with cracked urns, an entrance-hall, rooms with bright fires, well-trained dogs, people sitting at their ease and talking.

"Please take the parcel: it's got tripe in it and brains."

Seeing François hesitate, she burst out laughing.

"Not human brains! My husband markets the stuff: there's nothing I can do about it."

She was emphatic in words and actions. She was wearing a pair of man's slacks, and had a cloak of heavy Scotch tweed round her shoulders. Her movements were heavy and encumbered. He got the feeling that she took little trouble over her appearance.

"My husband's good with injuries: he's got the healer's touch."

François followed behind the egg-shaped figure striding ahead of him with marked determination. As soon as he reached the threshold of the long, low house, he made his excuses and thanked her for the lift.

"I'll be off now, if you don't mind."

"But I can't have you running away like this! You're hurt. We see so few people here that it's a pleasure to entertain even the victim of an accident!"

"I really don't think there's much wrong. I feared for a moment that something had happened to my wrist. But I can move it quite easily. Just a sprained muscle, I expect."

"Where are you trying to get to?"

"Sainte-Veyres: my father's expecting me."

"Sainte-Veyres—never heard of it . . . wait a moment, though—you don't mean Chauvigny, by any chance? I rather believe the name was changed last year, that the village has reverted to its ancient title."

Then:

"Robert! Robert!" she called.

A figure approached, holding a lamp. It seemed to emerge from the very substance of the night.

"I thought you were never coming. What a time you've been!"

"I gave a lift to somebody who's hurt himself." Lights sprang up suddenly in one of the rooms. The woman pushed François in front of her through a doorway. Through the wide-open french window he could see dense darkness striped with falling rain.

The house was surrounded by the rush and fury of a fresh downpour. The light of the moon had vanished. François had a fit of the shivers.

"You know that I've no longer any time for the maimed and the sick."

A good beginning, that! His wind-cheater was smelling now strongly of leaf-mould and clay, and was streaming with water. His face looked shrunken and repellent under its sodden mass of hair. He was shaking, and, when he wiped his face and the back of his neck with his handkerchief, he realized that he was soaking. Rainwater was dripping from all over him, from his clothes, from his saturated shoes. He felt as shabby and as miserable as some lost animal. He stood steaming gently in the warmth of the room. He wasn't fit to be touched with a pair of tongs.

The weight of his long walk lay heavy on his skinny body. He felt quite unable to relax.

"I'm terribly sorry about making such a mess."

He heard an imploring whisper in his ear:

"Stay here, *please*: stay here!"

He turned his head slightly and caught the merest glimpse of a young girl in an armchair. She looked as though she were asleep.

"Come along in, young man, and let's have a good look at you."

François had a delicious feeling of warmth in this cosy room opening on to deep darkness. He was aware of the fresh smell of newly baked cake. He was taken into an over-illuminated drawing-room divided into two by pillars. He walked clumsily on the carpet, and remained standing.

"Give me that wind-cheater of yours. I'll have it dried—and your shoes, too."

François took off his wind-cheater and his shoes. While the woman made off with these objects the man took his arm and felt it all over.

"Nothing wrong with you. You'd better have a glass of brandy before you leave."

François accepted the offer gladly. Perhaps there would be a plate, as well, of the cake he could smell—a lovely vanilla-flavoured crust with a shiny egg-varnish.

"I'm trying to find the village of Sainte-Veyres, but I gather the name's been changed. I've lost my way."

"Know anything about Sainte-Veyres, Alice? It's called Chauvigny now. The place rather prides itself on its culture, and has re-adopted the name it has in the old archives. . . ."

"You know perfectly well that I'm not up in local affairs."

"Now don't start that all over again, Alice."

Alice, resting her head against the back of the chair in which she was sitting, started to sob.

"You're behaving like that only because you've got an audience."

"Oh! leave me alone!"

"Trying to work on the gentleman's feelings . . . you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

The woman in the slacks had reappeared. She looked enormous in her loosely-knitted pullover. She was holding a large leather bag.

"Still at it! I'm all in, and then to have to come back to family squabbles!"

François was drying gently: that was all that mattered. It was a long time since he had been in a so-called happy family. With Juliette it was different. So far there were only the two of them, and arguments had a way of fizzling out for want of opposition. Poor Juliette! she always let her feelings run away with her. I never like taking her anywhere when she's feeling happy. She's apt to behave badly, because she's never forthcoming and polite except when she's got a misery. Everyone knows about it then—the butcher, the greengrocer, every stray dog and cat. Poor Juliette! always at the mercy of her heart! Sometimes she wakes me up in the night: "Suppose my heart stopped", she murmurs. Then she asks me to feel her pulse, to count the beats, to be sure not to miss any. We're like two shipwrecked mariners on a raft, whose days are numbered. "I'm sure it's stopped: listen." I tell her it's no use listening to something that is no longer audible. Then she says I'm a brute, asks for a glass of sugar and water, complains of the way I sleep, says she can't bear it, rubs her leg against mine, draws me to her, then breaks from my arms. She mutters something and I ask her what she's mumbling.

"Nothing; I was just talking to myself." I beg her to tell me what she's thinking. She laughs: "Suppose my heart rang a bell at every sixtieth beat. . . ." I clasp my hands round her neck, just behind her head where the hair is soft and tousled. "Can you put people to sleep?" I say "yes". She turns towards me: her legs bend, then straighten. "Put *me* to sleep, then." I love her sudden kisses, her ready lips, the

black river of her hair which gradually swallows me up. . . . "I beg your pardon?"

"I was asking whether you'd like the loan of an overcoat."

"Thank you, no: I'm really quite warm."

A black dog with pendent ears was sniffing round his legs and growling.

"Get out, Puck!"

The atmosphere appeared to be strained.

"Why don't you give the gentleman something to drink?"

Alice looked up and put her arm in front of her face as though to ward off an expected blow.

"Still playing the little martyr? Get the gentleman a drink—and let it be a big'un. Can't you see he's had a fall and hurt his arm? but *he* doesn't complain. Look here, monsieur: she's going to be married but doesn't want me to give her away, though I've been living with her mother for the last ten years. No husband could have behaved with a greater sense of responsibility. . . . As to her *father*—well, he was a good-looking, well-set-up young fellow, I grant you—but the only reason he got married was because he wanted a nurse handy to look after him. . . ."

"Of course it's you who ought to give her away!"

The woman patted his cheek and proceeded to open an oblong box trimmed inside with paper lace-work. In the middle lay two rows of dates looking like a fish with a coarse backbone. She held it out.

"Sticky but good. The Arabs eat them all the time."

François fully endorsed this view. With a discreet

gesture he spat the stones into his hand, not knowing what to do with them.

"Put them into the ashtray."

The young Alice was dabbing at her eyes.

"Oh! spare us the water-works!"

She made no movement. The man grabbed her by the arm and shook her.

"That'll do, now! A lot of fuss about nothing! Provided the good God can settle accounts with the parents, that's all He cares about. He's not going scrabbling in all our lives just to make a scandal in His own house. We'll have a proper wedding, Alice —one you'll remember all your life."

Alice only cried more copiously than before. "Still at it? A gay sort of ceremony it's going to be! Oh! do, for Heaven's sake, shut up. One of the few times, too, when we've got a guest. . . . That's the honest truth. We never have anybody to the house, simply because of her. . . . She'd set a whole bunch of priests sobbing! We've got to take life as it comes, haven't we? It's time she got married, that's in the ordinary run of life, isn't it? Those who don't marry never come to any good. There's something suspect about celibacy . . . if you don't marry, there's no way out except to turn priest or nun. Nature's given you a belly, Alice, and the sooner there's something in it, the better. . . . I'd like to have kids of my own, and not have to make do with those of other folk. I'm not saying that to upset you, my sweet, but facts are facts, and you can't have any, and, besides, we haven't the time. We're like artists—got to choose between brats and work. The tripe trade's an all-time

job. A fragile commodity which can't wait. Brains, too: food for a king, but as difficult to handle as an orchid: the slightest thing spoils it. I swear here and now, and take monsieur to witness, that I, and nobody else, shall give Alice away—and if they like to object, let 'em! *I've nothing* to be ashamed of. *We'll* get hitched later. You'd scarcely believe it, but we never have a Sunday to ourselves, not so much as a day off. The good God isn't such a stickler as to mind about the precise moment when I make an honest woman of her. . . . After all, we've both been married—and that ought to be enough."

"If you've finished your sermon, old chap, what about giving us some brandy?"

François swallowed the spirit with gusto, first warming the glass in his hand. Not such a bad bunch, after all, this hard-working family. Given enough time, everything would get straightened out.

"Is mademoiselle to be married soon?"

"You can call her Alice—everyone else does. In a month's time. I'll turn up about 9 a.m. with my van, take the morning off—just long enough to be present at the service, then fill up with juice and get going."

"I wish you every happiness. . . ."

François spoke the words in a low voice to the girl.

"Happiness, monsieur—that remains to be seen."

François wanted to get away. He didn't much like evenings which began without one's knowing whether they were going to run aground or not. When he went out with Juliette, he liked to have everything planned, and felt frustrated if the cinema was full, or the theatre closed for the holidays. He liked to be

able to order an evening as he would order a drink, knowing in advance exactly how it would taste. He wanted to know how his time was going to be spent, was ready for anything, provided he knew what to expect.

I'm prepared to take injustice in silence, to ask nothing of fortune, if only I'm duly warned. Then, I'm ready to keep mum. I can smell out some sort of secret drama in this house. It comes to the surface like air-bubbles in a pond. I only hope they get out of their difficulties. I don't know much about the tripe-trade, and Alice's trouble is something I don't rightly understand. It's not good-quality trouble, and I think I can see pretty clearly what's wrong. She's in a mess. The drama can be left to take care of itself. I wonder what Juliette would do. Juliette who has never cried in her life except from laughing too much. As soon as she feels herself faced with any sort of anxiety, any sort of preoccupation, her face goes hard. Till then, one has always thought of her as being on the plump side, but she suddenly looks thin. Her firm, rounded lips seem pinched: she half closes her eyes and becomes impenetrable. She doesn't mind putting up with what's coming to her, but freely, of her own choice. She has a deep layer in her of early happiness. She has never known, as I have, what it's like to live with a voracious father, and a mother who is no more than a ghost. Sadness, for her, can come only from within. She's got thicker hips than Alice, but much nicer legs, long, lively legs. There's Alice staring at me from the land of miseries. What's wrong with her? What does she expect me

to do? I'm thirty years old, and could do with a pretty girl.

Hold hard, François! Don't be more of a Don Juan than you are. Juliette . . . never anyone but Juliette: just a minute, my sweet: can't you see I'm busy with somebody else? She's got eyes like little stagnant ponds—pearl-grey, mouse-grey, dust-grey—flea's eyes—cat-grey?

"Won't you stay to dinner?"

Alice brought out the words in a sudden rush. She was blushing.

"The gentleman will do as he wishes, my girl. He's probably used to dining at the proper time. Here . . .!"

François thanked him.

"I'm on my way to Sainte-Veyres. I shall be there in less than an hour. They're expecting me. Thanks to you I can get on. You have healed me."

The mother had risen to her feet. "I've got to go to the kitchen: I hope you'll forgive me. Sainte-Veyres! Oh! what a place! None of our vans can turn in the streets there. Don't forget, though, you've got to say Chauvigny, not Sainte-Veyres. Do you know the road?"

"I'm afraid not: I lived shut away."

"At school?"

"No, in my father's house."

A silence ensued. François was afraid she might offer to drive him there in the car. Though fatigue had made him in no hurry to arrive at a decent hour, had left him in a condition of fragile well-being, a sort of unreal state which was much to his taste, he would very much rather go on his way alone, and

not in the company of someone who might question him about his private life. These well-fed folk probably had a liking for casual revelations, intimate confidences of a stormy kind. They would plunge into other people's lives, knife in hand, as though carving a breast of veal.

Alice had disappeared as quietly as she had come.

"Your handkerchief, Alice. You're always losing something, though never your head!"

François got to his feet preparatory to saying good night. The woman came back from the kitchen with a pocketful of biscuits still hot from the oven, which she gave him to eat on the way. He again expressed his thanks for this welcome break in his journey, for the chance of meeting people he could think of as friends and not as strangers.

"Have you got enough money on you, young man?"

François nodded assent. By this time he was back in the garden. The air was fresh but soft. He started off along a path, made his way round an enormous tree which had lost its leaves, and carried about its trunk a heavy mass of ivy, as a distaff carries its load of wool.

He pushed the gate, which opened stiffly. A man was waiting for him. He recognized him as the fellow from the farm.

"What d'you want?"

"I?—nothing."

François walked on, one clenched fist in his pocket. The country had again assumed a hostile look. The trees dripped on him as he passed. The moon had the appearance of a wan planet, and allowed itself to

be veiled without difficulty by masses of filmy, swiftly-moving cloud.

"You've not yet got to Sainte-Veyres for the very good reason that there's no place of that name now. You've got to ask for Chauvigny. I was waiting in order to tell you that. Besides, you're following the bad road."

"What d'you mean, the bad road?"

"There's always a bad road as well as a good one. You've obstinately made up your mind to use the one that nobody ever bothers about. The one you're on serves only for kids when they're out after black-birds."

"Good night."

"You know which way to go?"

"I'll manage: I come from these parts."

"No one'd guess it."

"Are you, or aren't you, going to leave me alone?"

François had covered a few more yards when he heard himself again being questioned by the man who was still standing motionless in his corner.

"Seen Alice?"

François came to a sudden stop and turned his head. The man was leaning against a wall. He was holding a slender stick in his hand which he was amusing himself by breaking into small pieces.

"What's that got to do with you?"

"I'm interested."

"Are you her intended?"

The man had by this time come close to François. He laid hold of the lapels of his wind-cheater, and shook him. He smelt of bark, of old wood, like a cat

which has been sleeping on a pile of timber. The smell was rustic, pungent.

"And why not, my good sir, why not? You know which of those windows is hers?—of course you don't. That's it—the one with the light in it. Look, she's making a signal: she's calling to somebody with her lamp. Look!"

François could not make him loose his grip.

"I've had about enough of you!"

But the man went on with his monologue:

"It's through that window that we all get into her room. She lets a rope down. You'll see, though I don't know whose turn it is to-night. She's got a fancy-boy in every farm and every pub. It's lovely, that room of hers, and always a meal ready, with fruit, candles and music. Next week it'll be my turn. It's me as is keeping *cave* to-night for the one who's visiting her. Don't run away with the idea that she'll get married. She won't. *We'll* put a stop to that. She belongs to the lot of us."

"What a bunch of rotters you must be!" François had trodden on the man's foot. The victim uttered a cry, bent down and took his bruised toes in his hand, hopping the while on one leg.

"I give you just three seconds to clear off: d'you get that?—three seconds."

Suddenly, the man made off at a run. The light in the window had gone out. There was no rope hanging from the balcony. François shrugged. Then he walked on. A hundred yards further on a stone, flung at long range, just grazed him.

What an evening! Leaving Paris, parting from

Juliette on the railway platform, eating an old wizened sandwich from which she had stolen all the ham . . . she likes that greasy old meat. Getting forty-eight hours' leave from the office . . . they'll make it up to themselves when July comes round. Then, dropping bang into this little tail-end of waste-land, where the inhabitants melt away at my approach. If my father were here he'd tell me in stilted terms that there is an explanation, hidden from our eyes, of which God holds the key: that not a meeting comes our way which has not already been pre-determined, which does not, in some sort, pass judgement on us. For him, everything which is incapable of a rational explanation, which is baffling, is so because death has taken a hand a little too soon. The age of the earth is the age of Jesus and no more. Thus, the world is immature, barely adult, incoherent, because it is for us to finish what at present is incomplete. We are God's understudies, His relays, standing ready on our toes to start off on the next stage of the race. No man is useless. There are no puzzles which do not admit of many solutions. More than once I waved aside those arguments, though after my first attempt at suicide I was inclined to accept them.

I had escaped from the house. I knew a little pond nearby, black and suspect, the banks of which stank of mud-saturated reeds. When I got there a woman was doing her washing. She was kneeling on a wooden plank. I watched her at her work like any casual saunterer. She raised a faintly flushed face and smiled at me. I helped her to rinse her shirts and dishcloths, enjoying the game and joining in her laughter. When

the last towel had been twisted dry I felt at a loose end. There was no more linen to protect me against the lure of that sleeping water on the surface of which the soap had left long foamy trails. The pond had ceased to be a stagnant place of death, a comforter. It was no longer possible for me to throw myself into that liquid expanse smelling of soap, which had taken on a bluish tinge. It had become something to be used: its destiny was limited to a handkerchief, to a baby's nappies. There was something faintly touching about it. I was fourteen, maybe fifteen. It began to rain. One doesn't throw oneself into the water in the rain. I tried to shelter from the shower. To that sly wish of mine to end my life, another had succeeded, to protect myself against the cruel rain. My despair had melted away: I was just a child caught in a storm, fighting against the fear of being struck by lightning under a tree. I was living beneath the burden of a greater threat. I think back to that woman. If ever I write a novel, she shall be one of my chief characters. She shall wear a voluminous blue apron convenient for the carrying of vegetables, cats and injured children. Mother Charity shall be her name.

François would have dearly liked to turn back, to abandon the vast stretch of country, the distances barely visible in the light of the moon, the cart with its shafts raised in prayer left standing in a field. Only the sky was alive. I bet there's never a car to be met with on this road. The first that comes along I'll ask for a lift, no matter where it's going. How ridiculous of my father to insist on my coming back for my birthday! Has he something to say to me? Is he eaten

up by remorse? His letter was no less dry than usual, no less demanding, and written on the familiar livid white paper with a mourning border. Where does he manage to buy such sinister stationery? It's ages since anything of the kind was made. One's got to live in a remote village to find those long-shaped envelopes lined with black tissue-paper . . . and that smell which hangs about everything he touches or holds in his hand, a smell of guttering candle-wax.

The night ahead of me has something of the same quality as the one when he came to the police station looking for me. I can see again his little silver purse, his skimpy gloves. To me he comes back as an "arrangement" in silver and black. His skin is growing darker while his hair is taking on an impossible silver glint—not that there is such a thing as white hair-dye! Oh! those neat clothes of his! The material has an insubstantial look as though it had been damped. All the policemen were impressed. They got to their feet when he came in. Not one but was within an ace of addressing him as Monsieur this, that, or the other—Monsieur le Président, Monsieur le Principal. A space was cleared round his person, as though by magic, round his heron-like presence. He took me by the ear with the fingers of one gloved and flexible hand. He drew me to him, pressed me to his bosom, under the eyes of the assembled bobbies, all of whom appeared to be deeply moved. He gave me a hug. Can one really give the name of bosom to that flat, rigid front part of a man's anatomy? Why did he always carry pins in the lapels of his coat? He must have had an itch in one of his ears. He scratches himself

at table when dinner's over. The prevailing emotion reached me with a brutal impact . . . though I had just spent a few marvellous days away from his harsh voice, out of his reach. . . . Suppose I had told him that I had been wandering round a cemetery—from habit, I think—a cemetery under the snow looking like a deserted restaurant! Our own unpretentious garden was the very spit of a cemetery with its dead straight paths, its bushes smelling of black-currant, its silence which the most scatter-brained birds avoided. I can still hear the Inspector murmuring: "He was found . . ." But my father would not let him finish the sentence. What did it matter where I had been found? He had come to fetch me back like a piece of lost luggage. Then, in the most leisurely manner possible, he went through all my pockets. My most secret treasures were laid out on a cloth, and what treasures they were!—even a scrap of coal which I had thought beautiful because of its metallic glint. I had also picked up odds and ends of things in the street, without having the slightest idea what purposes they served. It was a terrible moment when he came upon a metal buckle attached to a piece of ribbon which looked like silk. This funny little grip was, I gathered later, part of a woman's garter.

The road now led gently downhill between thick hedges. On the bank beside it there was a low-growing, stocky tree, with lighter-coloured grass growing round its foot. The moon shone on the clumps of mistletoe berries, giving it a strange appearance of depth. Broken scraps of flint glittered in the shadow which it cast upon the ground. François

remembered the tree. Once it had been elegant, but now it looked scaly, and somehow monstrous. He remembered an afternoon when he had been allowed to go, with his sister, beyond the permitted limits. Yes, it was the same tree right enough. A family of neighbours had come to take us for a drive in their car. Papa had given a grudging consent, on condition that we "wore mourning". For the first time in our lives we ate shrimps and drank Italian wine. Clouds of gnats swarmed round the glasses. Then, the thought that my mother would not be there when we got home, came to me. Where was she?

I dreamed of a young, quite a young, mother, an affectionate, rather mad-cap mother, given to sudden bursts of laughter, and a great teller of stories. Why?

François climbed the bank and wandered round the thick, heavy tree which was already more in-growing than he remembered it. Adrienne and I longed to be spirited away by that friendly, laughing family. I whispered to my sister that our father was not really our father, that he had stolen us, that quite soon somebody would come looking for us. We had had a good deal to drink, and, all of a sudden, carried away by enthusiasm, asked to be allowed to go with the family. Everybody, except us, shouted with laughter. We had never known what it was to have parents who could sympathize with our distress and our loneliness. We drove back to where our father was waiting for us—a living image of reproach: "Enjoying yourselves while your mother is lying dead in her grave: I say nothing of *my* feelings." . . . I was sick all that night, but refrained from asking help of

anyone. I found out, next morning, that my sister, too, had been ill. What a pair we looked!

François left the shadow of the tree. The wind in its dry leaves was making a monotonous sound like the rubbing of insects' wings. He continued his journey along the road. How wonderful it'll be to get somewhere 'at last! The country's no place for a townsman like me. I'm used to streets that don't fade out in a chequer-board of fields, don't turn into private avenues or paths which lead to secretive houses turned in upon themselves. Here, roads meet by accident, and then decompose without rhyme or reason.

Somewhere, a few hundred yards away, light was streaming from a house, a brilliant light which cut the road in two like a blade. François broke into a run. All his cares went up in smoke, all his hatred for this lost corner of a harsh and inhospitable land. A dwelling at last which still showed signs of life, which had not been abandoned to its painful dreaming, a real dwelling whose inhabitants were not shut away in pitiless sleep, where, perhaps, people were reading or sewing, or peeling the first apples of the season, where healthy, tired children were quarrelling; a calm, forthcoming, quiet place. Now at last there would be an end to his aimless wandering, his purposeless, rash journeying through a suspicious countryside. The night had now a meaning and a face —a lighted house in the distance. That was what night ought to be, a thin, but tenacious light at a bend in the road. Confidence flowed back. Hurrah for the night! François went on his way with gusto,

Strange meetings, hunger, weariness, the sharp stab of a pain in his heart—all forgotten! In a few moments he would be standing before an open window. Ah! blessed light! my small, compassionate light! A quiet sign upon his way, watchful, friendly. Already he could laugh away his fears and hesitations. To-morrow I'll write Juliette a long letter, and I'll tell her everything . . . and I'll be there as soon as it will. People in Paris don't know what night is really like, black night, I mean, night which is too much of a good thing, which exaggerates itself. No, don't shrug your shoulders, darling, what I say is true. We'll come back here some day, together. It'll be rather fun then to be lost. . . . If you don't utter a stifled cry after a bit, that'll be because you're devilish brave! By this time I know all about the stories of legendary beasts of which there are so many in the country. You can take my word for it that when I went through that wood with the dogs at my heels, I felt that anything might happen. I didn't know *what* mightn't spring up, and I made a great effort not to turn my head. I could feel a cold and melancholy breath on the back of my neck. I wasn't afraid of any night-wanderer, of any dog; it was the emptiness that frightened me, the absence of all sound. Then the undergrowth became, as it were, milky, fluid, transparent. What had been motionless, moved. Don't laugh! There was a crazy din in my ears, as though somewhere a great cauldron was roaring. It was my blood. D'you know, the whole thing began like a "thriller", with the corpse of my mother which my father had never wanted to have buried.

The light was now shining on the other side of the road, where there was a pallid wagon-shelter over the door of which a small black cross was painted. A pair of cat's eyes gleamed ahead of him. He stopped, then moved forward again, calling to the animal in a low voice.

It wasn't just one light but two lights; people seated at a meal, no doubt, some kind of a feast, perhaps a birthday party. He dared not take a peep between the half-open shutters.

François found himself in a bare, echoing passage. His shoes clattered on the tiled floor. In front of him was a glazed door.

"Who's there?"

Obviously nobody was pressed for time. There was a pleasing feeling about that interior. They're expecting me. It's *my* birthday party that's just beginning. He was impatient to make one of the guests in this peaceful abode. With a sentimental eye he looked at the two cloth slippers standing there for the use of any possible visitor, "just so's he shan't dirty the floor".

"Who's there? Good evening, Mr. So-and-so: how are you, Mr. So-and-so? I hope the little So-and-so's are well?"

The glazed door opened quietly, almost sorrowfully. A small boy appeared. He showed not the slightest sign of shyness. He was a frail-looking little fellow, with knobbly knees, a face over which the smooth skin was tightly drawn, bright eyes like laurel berries. He moved his ears. Perhaps it amused him. François had been accustomed to do the same thing

when he was summoned into the presence of grown-ups. It had been his way of expressing non-conformity and independence—moving his ears and his nostrils.

"How d'you do, young'un? I've just come to ask if I'm going right for Sainte-Veyres—Chauvigny, I mean—I've lost my way."

"Wouldn't you like to have a look at the dead man?"

"What dead man?"

"The one what died this morning."

François took a step backwards, just as a woman, dressed all in black, approached him.

"I suppose you've come on account of the deceased? He is in this room. We've lit two candles for the night."

François shuddered. Those appetizing lights seen from the distance, those quiet, winking lights which had called to him to come, were those of a death-watch. Oh God! Sweat broke out on his forehead. He didn't know whether he was standing on his head or his heels. He had much the same feeling as when he had been driven in a taxi to a distant hospital. Something was happening to him in which he was playing no part. He was a spectator of his own condition. He seemed to be experiencing nothing, only seeing something that was passing before his eyes, not within himself at all. He wished that he were holding a hat in his hand and wearing gloves. He felt ill at ease in his shapeless wind-cheater, with his untidy hair and muddy shoes. Behind him the rain had started again in a fierce downpour. The noise was increased by reason of its falling on to a greenhouse.

"I really must apologize, madame. I came up to the

house in the hope that you might be able to tell me whether I am on the right road for Chauvigny. I presumed overmuch on my knowledge of the district."

"You're looking quite pale: won't you sit down?"

François had a sudden vision of himself as a small boy when, one evening, he and his sister had reached home after an outing on their bicycles. His father had been waiting for them on the front-steps. When he saw him, stiff and upright, with his shadow showing immense upon the wall, he fell off his bicycle and struck his head on a stone. He had lain for several hours unconscious, or barely conscious, and had deliberately put off the moment when he should appear to have come to himself. He had the same pain in his head now as he had had then. If only he could lie down, just for a few minutes, and shut his eyes. . . .

"I've walked a long way, and I'm afraid I'm out of practice."

The woman's uncouth appearance, her puffy eyes, her friendliness, her air of utter prostration, made him feel all at sea, and added to his general sense of discomfort. He tried to take a step forward, but had to lean against the wall. . . . This house, with the hand of death upon it, almost on the outskirts of Sainte-Veyres, this house swallowed up in grief and silence, which seemed suddenly to have been waiting for him as though it had appointed a moment of meeting, and this soft, insinuating rain which was running down his face, pricking his eyes, getting into his mouth, trickling down his neck—and his mother beside him, wiping away the innumerable little streamlets with enormous towels, and people all

about him trying to stem the mounting waters with buckets, with sacking, and wash-basins—the deluge spouting from the windows, impregnating the walls with a horrible smell of damp plaster . . . he heard somebody shouting in a breathless voice—"it's a regular river! a road of water!" It came to him that he could not walk upon the water—that was something only the Lord could do, but no such miracle could ever have taken place. A drowned sheep bumped against his face—and he recovered consciousness. He was lying on a sofa. A young girl was looking at him. He opened his eyes, and the water withdrew as though by magic.

"Where am I? What has happened?"

The young girl smiled.

"It's no uncommon thing in this family."

"Did I faint?"

"Yes."

"I do apologize, I'm terribly sorry . . . and at a time when you've got so much to do . . . it's something that never happens to me."

After a brief silence, he asked:

"Is it . . . some member of your family?"

Then, since the girl said nothing, he added:

"Your father?"

"No."

François tried to get up, but the sudden effort was too much for him. He felt completely exhausted and incredibly weak. That walk of mine's paying me out. It was a very long time since he had been so utterly done in. These fits of prostration had been all very well when he was a child and his father had relapsed

into complete silence for days on end as the result of some silly little misdemeanour which he had committed in all innocence. It must be fifteen years since I last fainted. I thought that I was strong, that all that sort of thing was over and done with. . . . We're just a lot of weaklings, the fag-end of a family. What were our ancestors thinking about to leave us a heritage of nothing but a lack of vitality? François slipped his feet to the floor. He noticed that his shoes had been taken off. He must have been unconscious for a long time. He managed to get off the sofa, but swayed on his feet. The walls seemed to be moving like water.

"Rest a bit longer: my mother will be here in a moment. She's making some hot broth for you."

An acidulated voice called from somewhere:

"Claire! come here, Claire! He can't be left alone all night."

"I'm coming, aunt."

He wanted to say something sympathetic.

"You must be feeling very sad."

"No more so than the others."

François could make nothing of the girl's mysterious answers. What was the use of trying to find any meaning in them?

"I'm feeling better now: I can get going again."

He staggered with difficulty across the room, but had to grab hold of the motionless girl. Suddenly he started to tremble. Suppose I die here! Death attracts death. No, that's nonsense. I'm being influenced by the atmosphere of this house. He went back to the sofa,

"Forgive me, mademoiselle. It's perfectly ridiculous. This sort of thing never happens to me in Paris. . . . I've been walking for a long time across a bit of country which didn't, as they say, take kindly to me."

"Have you come from Paris?"

"Yes; I'm on my way to Chauvigny—or rather, Sainte-Veyres, where I am expected."

"Chauvigny's quite close, little more than a mile. Ah! here's my mother: don't tell her that I'm not feeling sad."

François turned astonished eyes on the young girl, for she was being free with her tears, even before a stranger. He could not see her face very clearly, but it seemed to be looking at him through a blur. She had crossed her hands on her stomach.

He had lain down again so as to be the better able to take the scorchingly hot bowl which the woman who had welcomed him without any questions was holding out to him.

"Don't move, and drink this slowly. Would you like to spend the night here? You're welcome to this room. Nobody will disturb you. Then you can go on your way in the morning."

How natural it all seemed! Here, in a house of mourning, he had been offered a warm corner in which to sleep, a refuge which had come unscathed through the drama and bitterness of death. No one, of course, was crying. There was a dead man lying in strange unreality on the other side of the wall, but he got in nobody's way. He had been given a room to himself. The night, now claiming its rights, had been reserved for him.

"No, really, madame, I oughtn't to."

François felt that he could no longer struggle against the sense of well-being which was now flowing in upon him. After all, why not? One less night to spend with my father. . . . My head is aching abominably: I can't face the wind again.

"We're simple folk, monsieur: and the night's rest I offer you is simple, too."

"But . . ."

"Don't be afraid: you'll be inconveniencing nobody now, it's all over."

"If I can help you in any way. . . ."

"Try to get some sleep. I have a great deal to do. I am a dressmaker, and I have a wedding-dress to deliver by to-morrow. Yes, there's to be a marriage. Something about the dress isn't quite right and it's got to be ready by seven. I shall have to sit up all night. I'm afraid I shall be working next door, but I will make as little noise as possible. I'll bring you an extra blanket in case you feel cold. I can't start the heating yet, it costs too much money. I'll wait until the others complain too loudly, and then I'll begin to think about it. But there's a fire in the kitchen."

François was left alone, feeling bewildered. How restful this sorrow was which did not impinge upon his life, but made of itself a humble and a courteous thing! If it had been my father, now! What an uproar of tears and moans there would have been! Here was a brand-new dead man close to him, yet no more in the way than a live one. Nothing was changed in the pattern of family life. He just had to keep to his room and pretend to be sleeping. How deeply loved he

must have been thus to share, even in death, the existences of those about him who could go on living their lives without being either inconvenienced or prostrated. In this house death was no grimacing monster, no tyrant playing games with the lives of others. What tender, kindly respect surrounded that room with its two tiny lights for all the world like eyes which were in no hurry to close, where the only shadows were those of the furniture, where the dawn could come without bringing any terrible change to that shut and exhausted universe which forms about a cold, emancipated body.

It was the first time that François had ever been in close contact with so modest a spectacle as a human passing. What a sense of freedom there was round a dead man whose memory laid no frightening burden on those near to him.

Through the half-open door he could hear whisperings. Then the voices sounded more distinct.

“You might have asked him who he is!”

“That can wait till to-morrow.”

“As though it weren’t enough to take in a complete stranger. You know what happens when one does that!”

“Stop it, Marthe!”

“Why should I? And how about to-morrow? Have you thought about to-morrow? Have you arranged for a priest?”

“He didn’t hold with religion: he told us so often enough.”

“He never told us anything of the sort.” There was a silence.

"He always fasted on Fridays."

"That proves nothing."

"All the same, Raymonde, we should have given him his chance of a last-minute conversion. Have you looked to see whether there's any money in his wallet?"

"Oh, Marthe, *please!*"

"It's lucky for us he died such a natural death. We'd better have a duplicate of the doctor's certificate. In this village one never knows. Tongues wag of their own accord when a man like that dies."

"Please!"

"What are you going to do when your husband gets back, Raymonde?"

"I shall tell him everything, not but what he knows it already. Have you finished, Marthe?"

"Now perhaps you realize what comes of all this love business . . . at your age, too!"

"I told you to stop it, Marthe!"

"D'you think he's left you anything?"

"Oh, go away and let me get on with this dress!"

"I'm your sister-in-law, and I have a perfect right to tell you what you've been floundering in. Mud, that's what it was, and because of you we're all in it up to the neck! I warned you . . . and there's a deal you don't know even now."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! leave my happiness alone as well as my grief!"

"He made love to me, Raymonde, before ever he turned to you."

"So you've told me already, at least a hundred times!"

"We've got to get him back to his home as quickly as possible, see? You've no right to watch over the body."

François had painfully resumed his seat on the sofa.

"Hand me the scissors . . . no, the long ones."

"If it had been me, what would you have said? Remember how it all began."

"Would you be so very kind, Marthe, as to finish off the bottom hem? I shall never be ready by tomorrow morning. . . . Oh, this light!"

Silence fell, and François once more stretched out his aching legs. He felt as though the muscles were twitching, unceasingly, imperceptibly. But it was pleasant to hear the prolonged swish of silk, the short, sharp breathing of the two women, the abrupt snapping of the scissors. . . . François dozed, his whole being amazingly at peace. He gave full play to his imagination, though stubbornly resisting the temptation to try to make head or tail of the dialogue which sounded to his ears like the in and out thrusts of a needle.

"I want to go to my room and get a little order into my thoughts."

"It would be truer to say that you don't want to help me, Marthe."

"It would be well, I think, for you not to adopt that tone, Raymonde. The dead need somebody to watch by them."

"Claire can do that."

"I no longer know what ought to be done."

"Cry over him, Marthe: be the only one to have

done any crying. It will give you satisfaction for the whole of the rest of your life."

"And you?"

"I?"

"I haven't once seen your eyes looking red since this morning. What your heart is made of I simply cannot imagine!"

"Don't talk like that, Marthe: don't talk at all. We can best show our respect for this dead man by saying nothing. My heart, Marthe? You've made use of it too often and too much, all of you. I've no longer got any heart left. Does that satisfy you? You were not, as you see, deceived about me. . . . Do you think that if I made a pleat here it would give a fuller look to the skirt?"

"You are a monster, Raymonde!"

"Thanks to you I have become one. Between you all you have changed me beyond recognition."

"Did you love him, Raymonde?"

"Please give me that reel of white cotton which is just by your elbow . . . thank you."

All that François could now hear was a long-drawn breathing, a sigh, a sort of mumbling. What a strange atmosphere of regret there was in this house of death! —tip-toeing into a story which had been going on for years, which death could neither interrupt nor turn back into the way of truth. With Juliette, of course, I don't bother about the past. When we're together, I ignore it. Mine's not particularly brilliant, and hers probably leaves much to be desired. Only through the gateway of mockery can we get back into our childhood. Besides, life as it is now with us has

got to be cut loose from what it was without us. I live where I am, and nowhere else: all the rest has nothing to do with *my* life. I refuse to accept it. But where I am I must live completely, without help from anybody else, with a card saying "closed" upon the door. I know that some day something dramatic will happen which will force all doors, but I deny and reject it. I turn away from a world which is shaky on its foundations. Its scenes, its future, are fraught with danger. A world which is ready to empty itself into another world is as perilous a thing as a river emptying itself into the sea. Such happiness as our lives may hold is small. Such hope as we may have is narrow. We draw no attention to ourselves. I once asked Juliette whether she believed in God. "Would you like me to?" was her answer. If we accept God, we accept the destruction of the world, and that I do not want to do. I must learn how to love as humans love, before learning how to love as God loves.

I am concerned only with the life I live day by day in this enormous post-war scramble. It still makes me apprehensive and worried. The marks of it must show still on my stiffly smiling face. I am capable of making a success of my life, as a schoolmaster once told me. If Juliette were in a similar predicament, what, I wonder, would her attitude be? She would make a bad job of it, I think, from sheer modesty. My father trained me up never to ask for more when my plate was empty. I don't ask for my life, I proclaim it. When there is no more wine I make do with water. Where now are the staggering marriage feasts of

Cana? I have often thought about that wine which came from no grapes, which, on the morning after the wedding, was left to go sour because no one had been brave enough to moisten his lips with it. What would my father say if he really knew his son, if he could read all his poor little secret thoughts? He would have been the perfect guest. He would have drunk the marriage wine next day. He treats God as his due, as his banker who pays out peace to him, and miracles. He keeps Him carefully put away in his pocket-book with the family pass-book, the pass-book of God. Yes, he is the perfect guest at dramatic moments, provided always that they are neat and well organized. His mourning serves him as an "Open Sesame"—his respectable, polished, well-cut misfortune. In short, he is a guest to be proud of. It is for my father to converse with death, for my father to show respect to what other people long to throw out of the window, for my father to be everybody's father, to be the one to go through bad quarters-of-an-hour, to be the important witness of the final coma. I feel sure that to-morrow he will make a point of wearing a coloured tie for *my* sake. If it comes to that, who *was* my mother? Papa has carefully torn up all the photographs which showed her smiling, and kept only one portrait of her, a stiff, official thing. But I can guess that she had a rounded face and a clear laugh. One day I must find out what she was like *away* from my father, claim her smile for myself alone. That glimpsed figure with the hands concealed is not my mother, but the wife of my father who rejoices in the lovely name of Léon. He has rubbed her out

and kept in her stead a diagram, a blue-print. But you, mamma, were strong. You had the indulgent look of that woman I saw in the train with her eyes fixed on a group of children quarrelling in a corner, amused eyes, sparkling eyes. Why does papa carry you about with him clinging to his arm like a corpse? What I need is your life.

“L

éon, I want to speak to you.”

“And when, my dear Germaine, have I ever forbidden you to speak to me?”

“The children are in bed.”

“Why should we not follow their example?”

“Léon, you must listen to me.”

“I have been doing nothing else since we were married . . . always moaning and groaning about yourself or about me. For four years I was away at the war. You found it possible, I think, to forget me as I am, and to welcome me back as you wanted me to be.”

“Don’t talk about the war.”

“Ever since it ended, on the 11th November 1918, I have been a member of the War Veterans’ Association.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Léon. You should be more modest. I refuse to believe that Bayonne was a very dangerous place.”

“I went where I could be of most use to the war—and to you. Don’t forget the parcels I sent, the chocolate from Spain.”

“Oh! stop! stop!”

"Good night, Germaine."

"No."

"What more have you to say to me: it is getting late."

"Léon, we must separate."

"Separate?"

"Yes, separate. Do you think we can sit through another meal with lowered eyes and mouths tight shut? Do you think we can go on playing at being parents? Have you noticed that François and Adrienne no longer dare to address a word to us? . . . Is it natural, at their age, to have such expressionless faces, never to look anyone straight in the eyes, to be so pale?"

"What can I do about it?"

"Such a state of affairs is no longer possible, Léon. You are no longer possible. Where are you heading? What are you doing? Do you ever smile at anyone?"

"When I came back after the war, did you ever notice, when you looked at yourself in a glass, how like a widow you had become? You had expected never to see me again. What fond hopes, I wonder, did you entertain when I was lying in a military hospital racked with suffering?"

"Do not take the name of suffering in vain! There was something wrong with your liver, that was all. If you do not love me, why not say so? Be honest, for once in your life, be honest!"

"If there was something wrong with my liver, that was because I was struck with a rifle-butt at the crossing of the Somme . . . a rifle-butt wounded me."

"The only member of our family to be wounded

was not you, but I. Look at me! Look what you have made of your wife, look! . . . Have you never noticed my hair, my eyes?"

"My poor dear, that has become an obsession with you! If you have suddenly grown old, the responsibility lies with you. I don't hand out wrinkles and white hair. What you want is, at last, to drive me to extremes, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . at last."

"Make no mistake about it. . . . If I stay, it is only from a sense of duty."

"If you stay, it is because it gives you pleasure to do so. You enjoy the spectacle of a broken, defeated woman. *I am your victory.* You treat yourself to ailing, miserable children: *they* are your victory. This is *your war*, war in the home, war waged all day and every day, war between two doors, between two mistresses. Léon, why did you marry me? On whom did you wish to revenge yourself—through me?"

"Do not get excited, Germaine. You will wake the children."

"I am going to fetch them. I want them to see their parents in their moments of intimacy and tenderness."

"You are mad, Germaine: go to your room!"

"No, I am not going until we have agreed to separate. It will be the first time we have ever agreed about anything."

"Why should we separate? Have you a lover, or, perhaps, two lovers?"

"Stop it, Léon!"

"You have never got over seeing me come back from the war. . . ."

"Stop it, I say!"

"I shall keep a firm hold on you, Germaine, with your hatred, with your wrinkles and your white hair. I shall keep you till the end."

"Léon, for the last time, we must separate!"

"No . . . what would be the point of our separating? Are we not far enough apart as it is?"

"You want to make use of me to serve as a screen to your adventures, so as to clothe them in an appearance of decency and dignity. You want to turn my withered face to advantage: you want to divert people's eyes from yourself. All you intend is that they should look only at my misery, that they should pity you for having such an image of wretchedness tied to you. I am a reassuring presence. Through me you can be honest. In that way I can be the support of your old age and of your spite. I am the image of yourself against which you are struggling. And now I have said everything I had to say, Léon. We must separate."

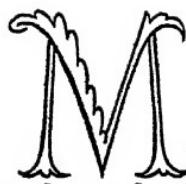
"Have you finished talking like an unhappy wife? I have given you the best of myself, and kept hidden all that you find displeasing. Is that my fault?"

"Don't play tricks with words! This is the last time I shall talk to you. From now on, I shall do no more than answer when you address me."

"Till to-morrow, Germaine."

"No, not till to-morrow!"

"Till when, then? . . . Germaine, Germaine get something done to your hair. You look like a tramp."



My head's going round and round: I want to be sick. Suppose I call out to those ladies who are keeping so very silent? I haven't felt as ill as this for a long while. In some idiotic way, illness takes me straight back into my childhood. . . . I become as weak as I was then: the colour goes from my face, my legs feel like cotton-wool. Sainte-Veyres—I beg its pardon, Chauvigny—is a village where it is always damp. The water seeps through the sandy soil everywhere. The houses are saturated, the walls are all discoloured: not a single stone has its natural, warm, appetizing hue: moss has rotted them like saltpetre. A strange land, where only the cellars are hospitable and dry. Why was it that my father never let me have a room of my own? Why did I have to be content with a closet, and a folding bed which, in the daytime, was transformed into an enormous arm-chair? I have never lived in a house where there were so many noises at night. Whether it was a beam, a partition or a stair, creaking I never knew. No paper could ever stay on the walls for long. It slowly came unstuck and hung like a loose piece of bark on a plane tree. What a vague, ill-defined house it was, with its purposeless passages lying coiled round rooms that

were chockful of pieces of furniture all stuffed with envelopes and bundles of letters—the accumulated correspondence of generations.

In spite of all orders to the contrary, I read many of those letters, though I could make nothing of them. They were as like as peas, for all the members of my family wielded melancholy pens. We lived surrounded, as with a mattress, by all those forgotten, antiquated letters, which took up every available inch, and filled to overflowing every chest-of-drawers and every cupboard. There were whole boxes of notebooks, memoranda, engagement-pads. Everything in our family had to be written down, as though to afford perpetual and visible proof that its members had really and truly been living persons. . . . Then there was the garret where sometimes, in midwinter, the snow hung on the rafters like dead, white owls . . . and the smell given off by the spindle-tree leaves which were as dry as my father's hand. Badly fastened files of documents occupied a strange black piece of furniture with vegetable carvings. . . . Papa used to tell us that he had had the biggest legal practice in the district, and that friends who were jealous of his success had persuaded him to sell it for a song. He was for ever working at some paper or other in the evenings, long after the sale, by the light of a lamp which gave the impression that it was holding a reddish glow as in a clenched fist. He still used the letter-paper with its professional heading. . . . Then there was the safe with a combination lock which formed the three first letters of my mother's name—Germaine. The door was kept carefully oiled, and

the brass knob was shaped in the likeness of a dragon's head . . . and the little silver box in which papa kept piles of receipt-stamps which were never used . . . and the long-legged inkstand. I can still hear the sound made by his pen when he plunged it into the glass bowl which held the ink—tac-tac-tac . . .

"Do you think, madame, that I might have a couple of aspirins?"

"I thought you would want some. Here's the bottle, and a glass of water."

It was Raymonde, the dressmaker, who had brought them. Perhaps she had heard a low groan.

"Thank you, madame. I feel ashamed to be causing you so much trouble. What time is it?"

"About eleven. The clocks and watches here never go properly. There *are* houses like that, you know. But somehow I always know the time. Try to get some sleep."

Suddenly she leaned over François and looked at him.

"It's odd, but you remind me of somebody."

"I've still got a lot of relatives living hereabouts. Maybe it's because of my nose, which is twisted a bit sideways?"

"I don't know."

He wanted to be amiable, in spite of the throbbing in his head.

"You, too, madame, ought to get some rest. You've a terrible day in front of you to-morrow."

"I never have terrible days: it's my life that's terrible. Who would think . . ."

"I noticed that you weren't crying."

She flushed:

"I've got into the habit of never crying, because of my work. A dressmaker has to have dry eyes. Dresses and sorrow don't go together. One mustn't have fumbling fingers."

François had already noticed the way in which she used her eyes, not, as he did, because he found pleasure in concentrating on objects, but as valuable tools to be used in the interest of a patient and careful craft, eyes which fatigue did not make swell, but narrowed until they were reduced to the semblance of two hard little marbles.

Already she was moving away from him again with the unhurried step of a hospital-nurse. She wore her hair flat, a fashion which she had long ago chosen once and for all to accompany her through life, because it did not get in the way of her work. When she reached the door she turned.

"This place is rather like the house of the good God, in spite of its rough appearance: the dead and the living are equally welcome."

The woman had left the door ajar, so as to let the warmth from the kitchen circulate in the room where François was lying. He tried to take a few steps, but the weakness in his legs forced him to return to the sofa. What had hold of him was a very ancient weariness, dating from far back in his childhood. His body was shaking all over. Fatigue struck at him like a thunderbolt.

Ah! those wretched games from which he had fled on any pretext, no matter how futile, in order to take refuge on his bed that he might quieten the

tumult in his temples and the trembling which enveloped him from head to feet! My sister used to think it great fun to call to me, knowing perfectly well that I shouldn't be able to answer.

All that François could do on those occasions was to turn his face to the window and look at the orange sun through the black branches of November. I loved November for its wild, high winds and violent rain—wild nature in its death-agony which left me not a moment of respite, but drove on me from all sides, caught at my breath and made me walk clumsily, head down and turned sideways, like that of a swimmer who must control his breathing. That devouring month called the house to witness its fury and impatience, kept us awake all night in bare rooms where every object seemed on the point of moving and muttering. "The month of the dead" papa called it. He was silent at such times: I had a right to my storm. I never told him that those wild days delighted me. He left us to our own devices, and, at the end of every walk, hoped, I think, to see us collapse at his feet, begging him to stop the tempest and the blustering rain. The season of the dead was kinder to us than any other.

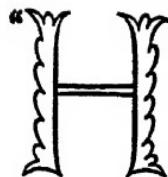
Wasn't that so, Adrienne? We used to play games with the draughts and the slamming doors, with the puddles which were no hardship to us, but filled us with enchantment. Nothing was forbidden us. Death allowed us to be hatless, breathless children.

Why am I thinking so intensely about my childhood this evening? My memories are so inordinate that I could tell them to nobody. Who would want to

hear them? Who would take them for what they are, at once burning and frozen? Fundamentally I don't give a rap for them. In Paris it is considered delightful for people, through the magic of their childhood, to become exceptional and strange. Not that my reminiscences would be lacking in matter. When I once get started on that subject, I can never stop. One detail leads to another, and off I go! I don't just run on like that to make myself interesting, to hear little admiring in-drawings of breath among my listeners. I get the impression that I am returning to a domain to which only I hold the key. Others can see it only through the iron grating of my gaze. I am like an animal caught in a trap. It's odd. Confronted by my childhood people want to brood, to meditate, to commiserate with me. When I speak of it I alone am moved to laughter, I alone feel a movement of revolt. Perhaps it is that people don't like childhood to be draggled in the mud like that. Some day I shall learn how to suppress the worst passages—all the mad part: but how?

If my father were to die it would be terrible. Such purity, audacity, integrity as my childhood may have is due to his distant, painfully throbbing presence. It is he who holds it in trust. I ask permission of him, as of a threatening guardian, to pass a few moments in it. Everything will grow confused when he is no longer there, when I no longer stumble over his shadow. Even sickness knows harbours where the sufferer can find hospital treatment. When, standing by his stiffening body, I shall find my past calling me to account, it will be time for me to keep a sharp

look-out on myself—unless, of course, I am wrong, and it was his regular breathing on my childhood which fanned the tiny glow of my unhappiness. Bah! I needn't think of that yet! My father is as strong, as tough, as the thorn on a rose-bush. His eye is clear. He keeps me in his cavern. What if he knew that I have a right to the sun—with Juliette?



Hullo, Juliette."

"Hullo, Fernand."

"How pleased I am to see you again."

"You're always saying you're 'pleased' about something."

"I'm easily pleased. I rang your mother up, and she begged me to come to dinner."

"Things going well with you?"

"Can't complain: things are going well."

"My mother is very fond of you. She regards you as an unceasing source of entertainment."

"Juliette, don't spoil this moment!"

"I won't spoil your appetite, if that's what you mean. You can stay hungry so far as I am concerned."

"Juliette, you have clung to an unpleasant memory."

"I have clung to nothing. I gave you everything back when you went away, even my memories."

"Juliette, don't make yourself out nastier than you are."

"Nor you stupider than you are. You must realize how much I dislike meeting you here this evening."

"It would be difficult for me to go now: your mother has been told that I have arrived."

"All the same, you must go."

"But look here, Juliette . . ."

"My mother eats very little at night: as a rule, no more than a bit of salad. Go and get your dinner somewhere else."

"But what shall I tell her?"

"Tell her nothing: go away, as you used to, on tip-toe."

"But I've no money on me. . . ."

"You know perfectly well that there are always some notes in that cigarette-box. Take what you want. It's always been your way to take second helpings."

"Juliette, I shan't go unless you agree to a meeting."

"Where?"

"To-morrow, noon, Place Saint-Michel."

"All right then, to-morrow, Fernand. . . . I find it difficult to believe that I ever loved you!"

"I will bring your letters with me, and you must bring mine."

"Agreed. I shall keep only one of them, the last, the one in which you said good-bye. It was a masterpiece."

"Till to-morrow, then, Juliette."

"Dinner! Juliette, dinner!"



François was lapsing comfortably into a state of torpor. He was conscious of a mild and vulnerable sense of well-being. If he moved it would vanish. Had he been sleeping? He became aware that the house was full of noise, of voices suddenly raised, of hurried footsteps, of objects falling. It was only from himself that silence came. But all about him the rhythm became more clearly defined, and louder. A door slammed. He was all ears. A great rattling came from the windows: it was as though they were being shaken. Only after a little while did he realize that the wind was blowing in wild gusts. He hadn't heard that particular roaring sound for ages. In Paris, the wind was more discreet, losing its full force in its passage through the streets. Only in certain specific places did it recover its stature, its mad stride—along the quays, for instance. But it soon shredded out into mere draughts, into irregular bursts of angry laughter which did not last for long. Here, on the other hand, the wind had come back in all its majesty, surrounding him with a thousand furious eddies, a noble wind, blowing without abatement, which needed a whole countryside across which to shout its raucous orders. But François could no longer recover the feverish response of long ago. He hesitated to trust himself to

this wild messenger. Had he, then, grown so old? Gone was the desire to venture out, to drive head-down against the squall, hands in pockets, to fling himself against a tree-trunk for recovery of breath. Instead, he snuggled down under the blankets, curled himself into a ball. Up in the attics the wind was roaring like a cauldron of water over a fire.

“Claire! Claire!”

Through the half-open door he could see the dressmaker. She had risen from her chair, and, under the hanging lamp, was inspecting a mass of fabric which was inflated like an expanded parachute.

“Claire! come here!”

The young girl came with a deep sigh. She puckered up her eyes under the glare of the unshaded light.

“I want you to try on the dress.”

“But, mamma, it’s after midnight!”

“Put it on!”

“You’re mad!—not now!”

“Why not now?”

“You know perfectly well why not.”

“What of it?”

“But, mamma, it just isn’t done.”

“What isn’t done? A dressmaker trying on a dress? I made all the mourning for a funeral last year, and the widow let me take her measurements with her husband lying dead in the room.”

The girl said nothing. She moved round the table which was thickly covered with scraps of stuff, and cotton-reels. With her hand she pushed back some dangling lace, and sat down on the edge of the table.

Marthe, the sister-in-law, murmured from where

she sat in the concealing darkness of an armchair:

"I don't know who's behaving worst in this house."

But nobody paid any attention to her.

"Hurry up now and put the dress on."

"The wedding-dress?"

"I've got to see whether it hangs right. How d'you suppose I can do that without trying it on?"

"Must I take my clothes off?"

"How can I see what it looks like if you don't?"

"All of them?"

"Yes: and you'd better put on some high-heeled shoes, for length."

"No, mamma: it's quite impossible: it'll bring bad luck."

"Don't be a little fool, Claire!"

The girl got out of her dress which fell round her feet. She was wearing a bright-pink set of combinations of the sort one sees on a market stall. She seemed not in the least put-out by the looks directed at her by her mother and her aunt. She was probably used to this kind of thing.

François looked at the untroubled young body. He guessed that it was light, and as soft as a feather bed. The rounded shoulders had the sheen of an apple. He leaned back on the sofa and smiled amorously, with the air of an accomplice, at Juliette. Claire had already passed the long, sumptuous dress over her head, a tunic of chalk-white watered silk. François straightened up. He was startled by the sight of that ecstatic young face which jetted up from the stiff, narrow collar.

"Don't touch it with your hands!"

Claire dared not move. She rubbed the back of her neck with a circular movement against the collar. She seemed surprised by the lightness of the fabric on her body. François thought about his own marriage, smiling fatuously. Juliette and he had already bought a few pieces of furniture. They both of them had a weakness for dark polished wood. The items were country-made, ornamented with rustic scrolls, and brass fittings as thin as dagger-blades. The compensation which he had received for an accident was all spent on these Saturday purchases. A road-hog in a car had knocked him down, and one of the wheels had crushed his right leg. It was still blue and unpleasant-looking, and he had got into the habit of going to bed before Juliette so that she shouldn't see it, especially since it had become thinner than its fellow. He suffered a good deal from it, but dared not report to the doctors for examination, because he wanted to make the most of his increasing incapacity, his "disability". One thing is certain, I can't run any more.

One day, he had dashed in pursuit of a motor-bus. Juliette was making signs to him from the rear platform, and he wanted to catch up with it. He had fallen, and then scrambled to his feet, and, with arms hanging motionless, had watched the bus make off. An old lady had helped him to the further pavement.

"My son, too, has been wounded. Ah! that horrible Indo-China!"

François had made no answer. He had been twenty in '43, and had had a bad attack of pleurisy. It had been a happy thought of his to lie sun-bathing in the garden, on a bank of rain-soaked grass, on a March

morning! It was after that that he had adopted a crabbed attitude to life. Juliette often used to say to me: "Isn't good luck enough for you?" I sometimes think back to my school nickname—"little death's head". I gave the friend who invented it a bloody nose. He fell on the cement paving of the yard, and lost an eye as a result. For several days I was confined in a tall, deep cupboard, which occupied the end of one of the rooms. I tried to knock out my eye on a nail, in the dark; but it hurt too much, and I realized that one could lose an eye only as the result of an accident and not from an access of grief. "Because of you, not only that boy, but God as well, has lost an eye", my father had muttered. But enough of all these lugubrious tales!

Claire stood as though frozen in the wedding dress which was so very much too big for her. She seemed to have lost all power to move, and looked as stiff as a dress-stand. I must be feverish. The fabric is quivering like smoke. How strange it is.

"Don't move, Claire: I can't see a thing. We'd better go into the bedroom where there's a wardrobe glass. Come along."

"But . . . but . . . *he's* in there, on the bed!"

"You're beginning to get on my nerves. *He* doesn't amount to anything in *your* life."

Claire moved round the table.

"It suits me very well, mamma."

"It'd suit any young girl: it suited me once. But that only lasts for a very short time. Stand still."

The mother went up to the dress and adjusted the folds, examining each final detail with tired eyes.

"Give me the pins. I shall have to untack that sleeve. It doesn't set right: one shoulder is lower than the other."

She went down on her knees at her daughter's feet, and patiently smoothed the bottom of the skirt with the flat of her hand. She began to sob. The little box of pins was overturned. A spiky pile glittered on the floor.

"Stitching and unstitching, I've just about had enough of it, let me tell you! Who ever made a dress for me? Who bothers about me?"

Marthe had not budged. Her two hands lay on her little round belly, and she was holding her head higher than usual. She began to nag at her sister:

"My dear Raymonde, don't start indulging in self-pity. This is not the moment. You brought disorder into the house with that man."

"I never brought him. He settled in here of his own accord, without a by your leave or with your leave, just asking to be allowed to go on with his smoking."

"I've told you once, and I tell you again, that he ran after all the women in Sainte-Veyres—including Claire."

"That's a lie! Leave me be, will you! I'm working. When I've finished this dress you can set about making me ill, all over again."

Marthe said no more, but bent down and picked up the pins.

"It mightn't be a bad thing to have something to eat: I'm hungry. We can't spend the whole night like this."

Claire had glanced sideways at the door behind

which François was lying in wait. Very quietly she pushed it to.

He heard the doors of the sideboard being opened. He was feeling better. The aspirin was doing its work. The argument began again, interspersed with great holes of silence.

What would happen when the dress was finished, and everything restored to its normal order? François kept his ears cocked.

"No! no! and again, no!"

It was the dressmaker's voice, as dead as a burned-out fire.

"I forbid you to sit with him!"

"Then why have you kept him here?"

"That's no concern of yours. Give me a breathing-space. You're buzzing round me like wasps. I forbid you to take any notice of that dead body. Let him be in death as he was in life, always behind my door. Leave him alone! Heavens above! Anyone'd think you'd have wanted to make yourselves useful, that you'd have behaved in such a way as to make yourselves indispensable to him! But what sort of a welcome did you give him, only two days ago? Which of you so much as shook his hand? Who was it took away the coffee-pot so's he shouldn't drink coffee? Why should *you* get excited now at a misfortune that has nothing to do with you?"

"Mamma, may I take the dress off?"

There was a ring at the front-door bell, several angry, urgent pulls. Something of expectation, of surprise seemed to make itself felt in the house. The clock ticked more loudly.

"Who can that be this hour?"

"Perhaps it's the police, mamma: they may turn up at any moment."

There was a loud and violent knocking at the door.

"I'll go."

A heavy foot-fall was audible, and the grumbling voice of a man in a temper.

"Come into the kitchen: I wasn't expecting you. There's some soup on the stove."

"What a country! I had to walk all the way from Forges!"

François had turned on his side in an attempt to see the new arrival who was obviously in a thoroughly bad humour.

"Nobody going to give me a welcome?"

One after the other the three women bestowed the tribute of a kiss on the man's damp forehead.

"Not a thing doing; I might just as well have stayed at home. Impossible to do any business. Give me my slippers: feet come first."

The dressmaker felt about for the slippers with a broom. They seemed to have got hidden away under one of the pieces of furniture.

"How often have I told you that I like my slippers to be kept warm, so that they're ready for me when I get in? Winter's here already, and the road comes away on one's boots. It's a bit too much! I've got to carry a brush about in my case all the time, and a bit of rag, to give the uppers a rub. I can't go seeing clients with mud up to my knees. Those clods can't understand an insurance man not being spick and span even though he *has* been wading through a

mucky yard. I'm not God. I can't walk on the surface of their slop."

At these words there came a sob from Marthe, which she half stifled behind her hand.

"What are *you* blubbering about?"

Marthe's sobs grew noisier. Her sister spoke to her in a low voice, but in vain. The other was entirely at the mercy of her tears which were forcing a way, hard and firm, from beneath her lids.

"What's up? You two been quarrelling? My heart's not a charitable institution, Marthe. Midnight's no time for caterwauling. Your nerves are all over the place—comes of drinking strong coffee on the sly."

He stared in silence at the three motionless women who seemed to be making a rampart between him and something that was invisible and forbidden.

"Say something! Claire! why are you all dolled up like that? There's some foolishness going on, I'll be bound. Well, so much the worse. Give me something to eat before we go any further."

In next to no time the table was covered with plates, a dish, a long loaf of bread ornamented with gold palm-leaves, the sight of which made François's mouth water.

"For years now I've been asking for hash! Anyone'd think I was asking for a rare luxury. I don't like soused herrings they taste like old boots."

François had in view the back of the unknown traveller who was trying to break off a piece of bread by pressing the loaf down with his hand on the edge of the table.

"Don't sit there watching me eat! It makes me feel you've got something against me for being sharp set!"

If I've got an appetite, its the appetite of a worker, of a man who never has a let-up, but comes home after dark without having eaten a scrap or had a moment's shut-eye all day long, a man who spends all of his time talking about illness and death with the sole purpose of extracting a signature from a lot of poor devils! I earn my living by exploiting other people's miseries. What about it?—you'll say: only this, that I've a perfect right to prefer one sort of food to another. This soused herring stinks of train oil: not very appetizing at midnight, and it's chock-full of bones. Filthy inland fish!"

François's eyes were fixed on the massive heaving back which now and again leaned down, and then rose from its seat and shut the door. The fellow was perfectly right. Fish at more than three hundred miles from the sea is bound to be suspect and disgusting. Papa always made us eat it on Fridays, gurnard especially, which has got a head like an old knobbly pink helmet. We always had it boiled, and the backbone was the only thing solid about it. The flesh fell away in little flakes which I hid in a handkerchief spread on my knees. Papa spoke about the phosphorus which we should absorb from the damp, soggy creature, and would act as a remedy, a panacea, for the strengthening of our fragile bones. He always waited for the moment when he could launch at us the familiar words: "with what you've left on your plates one could feed a whole family!" I would hurriedly rise from the table, ashamed and contrite, and rush into the garden where I dug a small hole and put in it the remains of my meal. How many gurnards,

I wonder, how many layers of gurnards, were thus buried in the ground! I could never venture more than a hundred yards or so from the house. As soon as my escapade was discovered, papa would call me back by blowing on a horn. I never knew what it was to have an outing with a friend, or to disappear at dusk with my sister. To all intents I lived in a prison. How on earth did I ever manage to get as far as Paris? I remember that in the district where I first lodged there was a knife-grinder who had a horn just like my father's. Whenever he blew it, I jumped. I would go to the window and bawl abuse at the old man. He would look up at me with astonishment. I never saw that particular look on my father's face, for my father was never in his life astonished at anything. There was not even disapproval in his eyes, but only a quick, dry flash which discoloured the iris. I imagined, then, that under the wand of some magician, my father had been turned into a knife-grinder, and, as a result of my intervention, had been driven from his home to wander under my window. How I let my imagination revel in a scene which I composed in which, with a trembling finger, I should point my father to the door. I felt that I was secure and without reproach: an unworthy father had inflicted much harm on us. As a finishing touch I summoned up from the distant past innumerable members of my family who should all be present at the great *dénouement*, when I should go down into the street, there to receive the approving plaudits of the neighbours, who would press me to their hearts, and say: "Thanks to you we shall now have a little peace and quiet."

“
A

drienne, will you kindly show me the picture which you are hiding behind your back?”

“It’s nothing, papa, only an old playing-card.”

“Give it to me, then, since it is nothing. . . . Who told you, Adrienne, that you might play with a photo of your dead mother?”

“But she’s *not* dead: that isn’t true! You keep on telling us so. I don’t want her to be dead!”

“Wretched girl! Have you not even feelings of respect for your mother? I alone can speak of her. I alone treasure her memory.”

“Don’t cry, Adrienne: François asks you not to cry. Do as I do.”

“Don’t keep your arms folded like that, François. Unfold them at once. Adrienne, I am very sure that it is François who has upset you with that photo.”

“I have done nothing wrong, papa.”

“You are always doing wrong. There is the large portrait of your mother in the drawing-room: is not that enough for you? Unhappy girl! *because of you* I shall tear up that photo, and you will go and ask pardon of the portrait which hangs in the drawing-room, her *true* likeness.”

"Papa we can stand no more."

"I suppose it never occurs to you that I, also, have had all I can stand? Is it my fault that Fate has dealt so cruelly with us? Do you think I have not shed tears enough?"

"We, too, have shed tears enough. Let us go away, papa: let us go to our aunts. It is not far. Adrienne no longer eats as she should, nor do I."

"Continue with the tale of your grievances, François."

"I want to be like everybody else: I want to be able to love."

"And here you can find nothing to love? Is that it?"

"In spite of myself, I still love."

"You will stay with me, François: we will stay together: I have plans for you."

"Papa, talk to us about mamma."

"Your mother . . ."

"No, mamma!"

"What is the matter with you, François? . . . so you want a mother, you consider a mother to be your due, who can be trotted out just for *your* benefit. You, a boy of sixteen!"

"I want nothing but what we have a right to. I am not asking you to renounce your grief. I am asking only that you should not expect us to believe that to laugh is an unpardonable fault. I have thought a great deal about mamma, and the more I think of her, the more do I want to smile. Can you understand that?"

"Can I understand *you*? What you want is to be free

of your mother's weight, and of mine, too. Have you not already killed me many times over, François?"

"It is almost as though you want to drive me to extremes, father."

"No, François. All I want is to direct you into the straight path, because unaided you will never find it. If that path is filled with thorns and tears, then it is God whom you must call to account. The further time takes me from that terrible moment, the more do I realize that I am right. It is a father's duty to be right. Go to your room, you little horror! You are deaf: you will no longer listen to anybody. Go!"



How many times have I got to tell you, Raymonde, that I do *not* like fried eggs on toast? You don't seem to be capable of cooking eggs like other people, so that the whites stay white, and don't turn into a sort of mica-like substance."

The Insurance Agent was eating greedily. He greeted the cheese with an outburst of fury, muttered oaths, and a rasping, angry cough.

"Look at that cheese!—I ask you! It's perfectly extraordinary, the way you never seem able to keep cheese fresh! How do other women manage, tell me? A cheese has only to be in this house for a few minutes to go as hard as a piece of horn! Better stick to yogurt—can't go wrong with that. What a meal! I'm all in; absolutely at the end of my tether. I sometimes wonder what induced me to take the job! Oh, I know that it gives you an excuse for hoping that one of these days I shan't come back, but I do come back, and I shall go on coming back until I drop. I'll know soon enough when death's coming my way: my little marble'll tell me, my dear little, all-knowing, all-seeing marble."

He took from his waistcoat pocket a pendulum

consisting of a small ball at the end of a chain. This he held, with an air of satisfaction, over the palm of his left hand, which he rubbed gently.

"That's odd! My pendulum seems to have gone crazy! Come here, Raymonde!"

"Oh, leave me alone, do! I've still got the little cap to finish."

"Come here!"

"What for?"

"It must be that it's got something important to tell me."

He was already passing the little shining ball over his wife's stomach, then over her face, her eyes.

"I've already told you that you're going to die."

She gave a shrug.

"You jolly well *are*—and it's not the first time I've told you so. Bring another bottle of wine: making this little beauty swing's given me a thirst. I know a great deal too much about everything."

"Leave me in peace!—go and do your tricks somewhere else!"

"My pendulum always tells the truth. It may hurt me, but I can't contradict it. Odd! it's as though it knew!"

"What?"

"That death is already in this house!"

"Look!"

Raymonde opened the door opposite that of François's room. A night light was still flickering beside the bed. The two candles had burnt out.

"Who's that on my bed?"

"Your friend."

The man went into the room, scratching his scalp. He made the round of the bed, then shut the door again sharply.

"Not dead, is he?"

"You can see for yourself that he is."

"How did it happen?"

"He was sitting on a chair, swaying. I caught him in my arms. The coffee-pot I was holding fell to the floor and was smashed."

"D'you mean to say there's no more coffee, Raymonde?"

"I made a second brew: I didn't forget you'd want some."

"But that's terrible!—and just as I was going to tell him a few home-truths! There was a lot I wanted to get off my chest!"

He appeared to be winded—as though he had been having a fight.

"Well, anyhow, we shall be able to breathe freely at last. It was you, Raymonde, who brought him here, who gave him . . ."

"I never gave him anything you wouldn't have given him yourself. I never offered him more than you did, Simon."

"And on my bed, too!"

"Where d'you expect I should put him?—in the broom-cupboard? The doctor came, but it was too late. I've notified his family. He'll be taken away to-morrow morning."

"So he had to come and die here! I'm flat out: been on my feet all day."

He turned to his wife, Raymonde. François could

not see whether they were alone. Sleep came to him, but with it a stubborn pain in the head.

"You were in love with him, weren't you, in love with him? For the last ten years I've been asking you that question: you can answer it now. Say something! . . . it doesn't matter what . . . but say *something*!"

He had seized his wife's wrists and forced her head round till she faced him.

"Answer me! I've got the right to know the truth, now!"

He released his wife and rubbed his hands on his jacket.

"I know everything!"

Raymonde remained standing, not daring to move to the chair on which lay the work with which she had been occupied, the little flimsy cap with its wreath of wax drops which were intended to look like rose-buds.

"Leave me alone, Simon. What good will it do you to know now? I've still got a deal of work to get through. You'll have all the time in the world to torture me later. I've had enough of this, enough, I tell you!"

"Enough of what? I, too, work all day long without a let-up. After selling insurance policies I sell *apéritifs* which nobody wants, stuff that's no longer in the fashion. I half kill myself talking about death, so as to get rid of my policies, and then about the pleasures of life to the same people, so as to be able to sell them a bottle of spirits. Just you listen! I'll show you how I introduce my rubbish. I've got the patter perfect. I call at a farm, and:

“ ‘It’s death knocking at your door,’ I say. ‘Don’t cry out, keep calm, I am here to help you. You can die without remorse, without anxiety. With me at hand the members of your family are no longer fledglings lost and deserted round the empty nest. Here is money, a great deal of money. Fertilizers can be bought, the well-rope repaired, the vet paid, the roof mended. You can die now as though death were no great matter. With a tiny signature at the bottom of this form, and a small sum paid to me each year, you may have a peaceful death, a gilt-edged death, a death which is no death at all—especially if you are a catholic.’

“And, for selling my *apéritifs* in bar-parlours:

“ ‘Good evening to you all, ladies and gents. Who has drunk once will drink again. A small glass brings health, a big one happiness. For twenty years now I have been drinking my elixir, and it is as though I bore a charmed life. I make fluent love; my wife drinks from my lips—and why? Because this *apéritif*, Vinorex, compounded from herbs ripened by the southern sun, is not only a delight to see and to taste, but is one of the foremost pleasures of life. Vinorex, the wine of the Stars, of the Pin-Up girls, of the Crooners! Vinorex is more than a drink: it is a song!’ ”

“If you’ve finished your act, Simon, you’d better go to bed—in the upstairs room.”

But Simon was all worked-up, striding up and down, twisting and turning.

“Claire! Claire! how many bottles of Vinorex have you made?”

“I haven’t had time to make any.”

"What d'you mean, haven't had time? I can find time to come back and see you, and whom do I find waiting for me?—our poor friend, the cricket on our hearth."

"Oh, do stop!"

"So I've got to make Vinorex in addition to selling it, have I? Who, I should like to know, is going to find the household money?"

"I, as you know perfectly well, Simon. D'you really think people are such fools as to buy your bad wine?"

"I have had labels printed in gold lettering 'Vinorex the Wine of Those who Know'. I have ordered ten thousand!"

"Simon, go and get me the embroidery scissors: they're in the cupboard drawer."

"What! next door? In the room where our poor friend is lying?"

"All right. I'll go myself."

There was a sound of a door opening, of a cupboard creaking. François could hear the dull squeak of a drawer being closed.

"And no one is in tears. I come home, and everything is as usual!"

"Precisely as usual, Simon. Your sister can give you that assurance."

"But you, Marthe, have no feelings. Our best friend has just died under our roof. How is it that you're not all prostrate with grief? Has everything been done that should be done?"

"Rest assured, Simon, everything has been done."

"I will go and pray by the body."

"Who taught you to pray?"

"One always prays by a dead body. Recite the *Pater* so's I can refresh my memory. I don't want to be thought a lout. What about Holy Water? Isn't there any Holy Water? You could have bought some from the cure. There's nothing here there ought to be in a respectable house! A twig of box, too: we must have box, fresh box."

"The dead man has all he needs, Simon. Don't get excited."

"How long have we got to keep him?"

"I've told you already; until to-morrow morning. Some of the neighbours will fetch him away."

"That's right! everything done without a word to me! You wanted to show that you could do without me, that I'm useless. Nobody thought of waiting for me because you, Raymonde, had your reasons for speeding up the gentleman's departure. Claire! Claire! I do beg, if it's not too much to ask, that you'll make twenty bottles of Vinorex. It's to fill an order—an order, I tell you. There's one small cask all ready. Our friend was very fond of Vinorex."

François had had about enough of this noisy night, of Simon's staccato voice. Would they never go to bed? Surely, it couldn't be long now before dawn would come, treading lightly, to this inhuman house? I remember that when I used to wake up in the night, I could never go to sleep again. I would hurriedly strike a light. I fully expected to see the door open and some stranger enter the room with an amused and knowing smile, and a finger at his lips. I could hear my sister screaming in her sleep.

I was no longer at home, but in some large country house, all agog. Anything might happen. There was a drumming in my ears. I got up and walked about the room. The cat arrived with sleep-blurred eyes and jumped on to the eiderdown. I remained standing. I thought I could hear distant voices. It was I who had woken their owners. Anything rather than be the one person who knew that everything in the house was dead, that old Catherine who had passed away a year ago, was about to return, bringing me a crackling roast chicken on a bed of moss with mushrooms growing round it, that my sister was at her last gasp, that my father was sleeping with a bloody head. Was I safe in the house? Why not run away, and collect all my odds and ends on the bank of the pond—a little burnt-out fire of charred sticks, some American magazines stolen from my friend Renaud, an empty brandy-bottle, a handkerchief with my initials on it, a shoe. . . . But how can I run away alone? die alone? I have had enough of doing everything by myself. How about hiding in the church, stirring up the village, dabbling my feet in the Holy Water stoup, telling the curé that I hear voices? . . . That is true: I do hear voices but not voices suited for a curé's ears. Can I tell him that I hear the voice of the little man hidden away in the big coloured bottles in the chemist's shop, or the voice of the young woman in Paris who killed herself in the Hôtel des Voyageurs, at midday, with her hair stuck full of tortoiseshell combs?—or mamma's voice—but I must teach her how to talk to me. She knows already how to say—"my little boy, my little boy". Soon I'll get her to

say—"François, darling, François darling". Eventually she will be able to say all the things that give me pleasure. We shall use the same phrases, and nobody will be able to speak them—only our two selves. I would murder the first person who called me "my little boy", would reduce her to pulp and pierce her tongue. What would be really nice would be if mamma could turn up, settle down beside my bed, and never go away again. I can just see papa's face! But it is thanks to me that mamma lives again, and I would say to him: "It's for you to take her place: just go and die!" We would leave the house and go to a country where one's shoes never got wet when one walked through the fields; where there would be real dust, and windows without curtains through which one could really see the sun. Mamma, don't leave me!



I must write to somebody—
but to whom? To whom can I write? How can I live
alone, how? You are vile, Léon, vile! You have shut
me away in this house, you have taken from me all
the sweetness of life. You have rooted up the flowers
from the garden, and prevented me from planting
others. You have refused to allow me to bring up
Adrienne and François in *my* way. You have sent
them to stay with their nurse, saying that so they will
be able to get a few days' rest. You have locked me
into my room, fearing that I might commit some
foolishness. Oh God! who is there who still re-
members me, remembers Germaine?

*Germaine, Germaine,
ta beauté fait battre les cœurs;
tu seras la souveraine
qui mange nos tartines de beurre.*

I have never forgotten that little poem which I
found one day under my pillow when I was sixteen,
with five names of boys with whom I used to play and
dance. Among them Stéphane's, who came first in my
affections. To-day he is one of the new-rich. His wife
has the largest diamonds in Paris. He is the only one

to whom life has given a full plate. I ran towards marriage as one runs towards the sea, carefree, with outstretched arms. And here I am, sitting in my room, surrounded by wreckage.

To whom can I write a letter explaining everything? I have no women friends left. Léon created a vacuum by wanting to go to bed with all of them. I ought to have run away from him on the very day after our wedding.

Oh! that night when I lay waiting for him! He did not turn up till the morning, and then only to ask me to get him his coffee and rolls.

I know. I will write to my children. No one can prevent me from sending them a letter which they will open and read years hence.

MY LITTLE ONES, MY DARLINGS:

This is your mother writing to you. You are twenty. This letter has taken all those years to reach you. But you had to know that, in spite of everything you have been told about me, I am, I still am, your faithful and your loving mother. Perhaps when you open this envelope you will know nothing of me. You will, I imagine, have been banished from my tenderness, even after my death. Your mother will have been represented to you as a monster, or as a poor old woman who was a bit touched in the head. You will have been forbidden to think about me, to realize that I could ever have been the simplest, the most unhappy, the most timid of mothers. You are twenty; I am no longer with you. But my shadow lies heavy over me, and the thought of me stills your

laughter. I can scarcely hope that you will forgive this tardy arrival of mine in your midst, through the medium of a letter written long ago, in a hand you do not recognize, bringing news of a strange woman who comes now to sow disorder in the routine of your existence. But what other course can I take? I *must* say what I have to say when *others* least expect it, so as to be assured of having my rightful place in your hearts.

I was *truly* your mother. My most tender care was given to you. You sought my kisses, you snuggled in my arms, you caressed my poor, worn face. Your hands still keep the warmth that once was mine. But your father could not endure the thought that your love was for me alone, that it was I, and no one else, who watched you at your play. Quietly, inexorably, he killed me. He did all he could to divert your affection from me. He, who has spent his life in lies and corruption, fenced me off, shut me away, condemned me to be no more than a poor wanderer in my own home. He denied me the right to touch anything in it. He uprooted me from my garden, from my furniture, from my hope. He stole such jewels as I had and shared them out among his greedy mistresses. The police knew all about that. He drove my family away on the lying pretext that my health was failing. The only visitor I was allowed to see was an old, dirty, stammering woman in whom I had taken an interest.

I can stand it no longer, for now, as I write to you, I am still living. I will give up nothing, not even my hatred. I will fight for you. I will try not to make

this letter a terrible record of my miseries, a frozen, stupid statement of my wrongs. I must use such strength as remains to me to avoid being crushed under the weight of a bewildering wretchedness. It may be that I have been wrong. From the very first, perhaps, I should have silenced my anxiety, have kept myself in reserve for some later occasion. Perhaps he is not so strong a character as I imagine, nor so relentless in his evil-doing. It may be that my fear of him has had the effect of accentuating his hardness, that he was in rebellion against my innocence which I was determined should be without a flaw.

If I go on like this my letter will never end. My wish is that, when you read it, you shall see rise before your eyes the image of just such a mother as you would have wished to have: proud, passionate, never giving ground before the onset of no matter what torments. You must believe, to the last detail, that that was what your mother was like. I will spare you the end of the story, keep from your ears my ultimate cry of pain, hide myself from your emotion. I do not want to die *like an animal* before your eyes. I shall go on loving your father. That, maybe, is the last scrap of wreckage to which I can cling—to love him without flinching.

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François opened his eyes. His heart was beating violently. What was it that had startled him into wakefulness? On the other side of the door the argument was going on relentlessly. He found himself trembling, as though, suddenly, it was his fate that was at stake in the room where two human beings seemed to be engaged in an endless quarrel.

"Come here, Claire, come here, and take the slap you so richly deserve. Am I, or am I not, your father? Come here, you lying little slut!"

"Let her alone, Simon. Can't you see she's wearing the new wedding-dress which I've got to deliver to the Chanteaus by seven?"

"Come here, Claire. I have something for your private ear. Who is your lover? Answer me!"

There was a sound like a stifled whimper. Through the crack of the half-open door, François could see Claire circling round the table in an attempt to escape from her father.

"Everything gets known in the long run. Look at this letter. It was lying innocently there with my mail on the dresser."

"It is an anonymous letter, Simon."

"Anonymous or not, it is a letter about Claire. Besides, it is signed. I can't read the signature, but it's there right enough. There's no smoke without fire. Claire, are you going to have a child?—yes or no?"

"Let the girl be! Two o'clock in the morning's no time to start wrangling!"

"When it's a question of getting at the truth, what does time matter?"

"Listen, Simon: you come home, and all you do is to create disorder."

"Disorder? What about that dead man in there? Is that what you call order? Do you think that in decent families people just come and die like that, shuffle off their mortal coil?"

"Oh! for Heaven's sake! I have got to finish this job, and I need Claire. The dress must be finished, and there are only a few hours left to finish it in. Wait until I've got it off my hands!"

"Got it off your hands? Then you'll start on something else. There's not a clean, clear corner in this house where I can put my personal belongings. It's as open to all comers as a public house—women trying on in front of my wardrobe glass, men dying in front of my wardrobe glass! There's always some female in one of the rooms listening to my radio, or walking about stark naked, making it impossible for me to go down the passage or feel at home in my own house. I don't suppose you've forgotten that silly creature in nothing but her combinations whom I came on by chance? From the way she shrieked I might have been raping her."

"Don't worry, Simon: this is the last wedding in which I shall be involved; the last dress, perhaps, of any kind that I shall make."

"What d'you mean—the last dress you'll make?"

"Just what I say."

"And what are we going to live on?"

"That's up to you, Simon."

"Fine! And I suppose you'll have people making dresses for you, that you'll go spending my money in the swank shops! . . ."

François could only with difficulty make out the dressmaker, for all that her face was raised to the light which ate up its wrinkles, absorbed the shadows round her eyes, and turned her skin into something light, silky, and insubstantial.

"No, Simon, it's just that I am going to have time in which to be happy."

"To be happy? Can't you be happy like anybody else?"

"That's not what I mean, Simon. Very soon I shall *have to be happy.*"

"Have to be?"

"Certainly: I shall have plenty of leisure, shall be able to think about myself."

The silence that followed was broken by the sound of Simon's breathing, by a striking clock, by the faint gurgle of pipes.

"I am losing my sight, Simon."

"You're losing *what?*"

"My sight."

"So, you're losing your sight: what is all this nonsense?"

"It is quite simple, Simon; I am losing my sight."

"But one doesn't just lose one's sight *like that!*"

"For twenty years I have been working, day and night, needle in hand, without stopping, without giving myself a break except for meals, without ever letting my eyes look at anything but a small piece of fabric. I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you that I haven't yet seen anything of the country here, that I know nothing of it beyond the last house in the village."

"On what authority, Raymonde, do you say that you are losing your sight?"

"On the authority of the doctor."

"The doctor? What doctor? Our crack-brained old pill-merchant?"

"An oculist in the city. I went in the day before yesterday, by bus. I didn't waste any time, just saw him and came straight back."

"I'll go and see this oculist of yours, and give him a piece of my mind—an ignorant clod like that talking a lot of nonsense just to make himself important!"

Simon passed a large hand with spatulate fingers over his cheeks, rubbing and kneading them in obvious embarrassment.

"You go losing your sight and no one's told. I'm the last to hear of it!"

Then, in a sudden access of gentleness:

"Perhaps you'll be able to see just a little?"

"I've told you, Simon, that I'm losing my sight."

Simon appeared to be completely at a loss, bewildered by the thin, passionless voice in which his wife was announcing a devastating piece of news the

implications of which he could not as yet fully take in.

"Losing your sight . . . losing your sight . . . it's not as simple as all that. . . . You've never worn spectacles . . . it was foolish of you not to."

Simon must suddenly have started to think about his wife's eyes, of the dullness which had obscured their former brightness, of the way in which they sought concealment under their delicate and shrinking lids.

"Let's have a look at these eyes of yours."

"What good will that do, Simon?"

"All the same, let's have a look at 'em."

"What more will you see in them than I've told you?"

He had swiftly taken his wife's face between his hands. This gesture of compassion seemed to surprise her.

"Your eyes are just as they always were. It was because of them that I married you: it'd be too stupid to lose them."

He stroked her cheeks. The action, thought François, was clumsy but sincere.

He could not often be like that.

"Don't go on, Simon; though it's very sweet of you."

"To-morrow I'll take you to Paris to see a specialist, no matter what it costs."

"It's too late, Simon. I know that, because of what the oculist told me. There were two whole days in the course of the last couple of months when I couldn't see at all. But you never noticed it . . . we'll get along somehow."

The dressmaker put her needle and thimble on the table, and rubbed her eyes. She took a long time over the process, and seemed to derive some benefit from it. Something of calmness seemed to hang precariously suspended in the bright light which had, all of a sudden, become so precious.

"Shall I turn out one of the lamps, Raymonde?"

"No, thank you."

"It is only the dead that God makes blind."

"Leave God out of this, Simon. He has nothing to do with us. It's not for *you* to call upon *Him*—though it's all right for the rich."

"I know what I'm talking about. God will leave us to get out of this mess as best we can."

"Why should He bother about us? We're not fit to be seen in church. What's our family but a lot of lives knotted together like a piece of old string which can still be made to serve? We don't put ourselves out even for our relations."

There was no noise now from outside: the wind must have died down. Raymonde, the dressmaker, went back to her work, moving round the wedding-dress which Claire had on.

"When are they coming for him?"

"I've told you already, in the morning. I took one of your shirts to put on *him*."

"What! you took one of my shirts, knowing it was the last clean one I had? That really is a bit too much! What am *I* going to do? It never occurred to you, I suppose, that I've nothing to change into to-morrow? What does a bit of dirt matter to *him*? . . . You know perfectly well that I've got to look presentable

when I visit my clients, properly dressed and with impeccable linen. . . . While I go tramping the countryside for a suspicious insurance company and a tasteless *apéritif*, you take into my house a dying man. You pamper him, you nurse him. You throw open my house for anyone who chooses to knock at the door to come in and kick the bucket in comfort!"

"Hush, Simon."

"I won't hush! It's enough to break a man's heart. It sticks in my throat. You'll be the death of me. What time d'you think I've got to think about myself?"

"No one's got time to think about himself. All one's got time to think about is buying bread, paying the rent and the gas and the taxes. The only trouble one can afford to think about is forking out when the collector calls."

"And then, on top of everything, you calmly inform me that you're going blind! Anyone would think there's nothing more to be done than shut one's eyes and hold one's tongue! But I'm not one to hold my tongue. I tell you, I'm sick and tired of living in the dark. I like to know where I'm going!"

"Go to bed, Simon. A good night's sleep will do more for you than revolt. Or, die for something."

"D'you think our friend in there died for anything? In this house he was always a secret, a furtive guest: a sticker. What did we know of him? What do you know of him?—yes, you especially?"

Simon had moved towards the room where François lay. He stopped on the threshold, dumbfounded by what he saw.

"Hullo! what are *you* doing there? Raymonde, Marthe, Claire—come quickly. There's someone asleep in this room!"

None of the women moved.

"There's someone on the sofa, I tell you!"

François had propped himself up on one elbow. He was startled, and blushed as though he had been caught in some shameful act.

"I must apologize, monsieur: I had lost my way...."

"Like Tom Thumb, I suppose?" . . .

François tried to smile, but Simon was plainly outraged.

"Oh, please don't bother to explain! Just treat the house as your own. There's nothing left for me but to go and doss down under the stars!"

Raymonde called to her husband from the kitchen.

"Don't disturb the young man. It was I who asked him in."

"*You* did? You, who would never receive anybody but our poor friend?"

"Oh, don't make any more trouble! He's very tired. He'll be off in the morning."

"Is that so! Well, go to sleep young man, and happy dreams!—if you can come by them in this nightmarish house! I would, however, point out that you have not yet said good evening to me."

"Good evening, monsieur. I apologize. I presumed overmuch on my strength."

"This is my eldest son's room. You'll have to make your peace with him when he comes in."

"I asked you to let the young man get a bit of rest.

Julien went away two years ago: it's not very likely that he'll turn up to-night."

"One never knows with these headstrong young fellows."

Simon rubbed his hands together as though to make it clear that he wanted to have nothing to do with so irresponsible a situation.

François felt that he was cutting a poor figure. He took out his handkerchief and noisily blew his nose. He felt the need to impose his presence on this deep, dark night in which drowsiness seemed to be disputing with anger the control of a shifting and disjointed plot. He could feel the tell-tale evidences of fever all over his body, and not only, as before, in the dampness of his wrists and the fire in his cheeks. He knew it, that fever, from of old. It had been, not seldom, a faithful companion in the days of his childhood, with something of magic in it which had been of service to him in his contacts with his father.

On the inside of his elbow a vein was pulsating violently. François loved that faint blue line plunging deep into the substance of his flesh, and the way in which it set a tiny corner of the skin regularly rising and falling. His very life was closely bound to that bubble which seemed so intent on bursting through the epidermis, and scattering its content of blood. He watched, with a certain enjoyment not unmixed with a faint anxiety, this piece of frail and precious mechanism. Its wild activity put him in mind of a squirrel in a revolving cage. That small, familiar vein had a special liking for the back of Juliette's neck where it continued, under her hair, its concealed

pulsating. Sometimes it seemed to fall asleep beneath the hot weight of her head. When that happens, I withdraw my arm and try to track down under the reddened skin the unobtrusive, uninterrupted beat. The little vein resumes its rhythmic movement. But that won't happen this time. Juliette knows nothing of the little vein which sometimes seems to go quite mad, racing in lunatic fashion under the faint surface sweat produced by the sweet burden of the neck I love because of its bitter taste, that neck which swells like a bird's crop when she turns or lowers her head. I'm not very fond of this kind of meditation, but my father always schooled me to listen to the movements of my heart and lungs. I don't really much like to feel that I am fragile and vulnerable. If I am truly to live I must learn to forget myself, to detach my mind from the adventurous agitation of that little vein. In order to live I must turn my eyes outward, away from my rather crazy carcass which I was given without a word of apology for its imperfections, its refusal to be controlled.

When I was a child I used to believe that one day tiny figures would jump out of the little vein. They would be there to serve me, unseen by anyone except myself, their sole duty to comply with the least of my desires, to play wonderful dramas for me upon the stage of my bed. I always seemed to be ill when I was ten—imagining hosts of the little creatures whom I kept hidden away under my pillow in deep caverns filled with secret windings, and others, too, ready to set off as an advance-guard to places of great danger—my father's feet, Adrienne's hair, the under-

sides of tables, the kitchen drawer in which the knives were kept. . . .

All of a sudden, François felt excited. Why should that long-lost memory of childhood have come back just at this moment? This was the first time that he had ever travelled back to the time of his earliest loneliness and dreams and wonders. By what miracle have I been transported to the bed of my childhood's nights? How is it that I have not yet grown older? It must be the presence in me of this fever, this chattering, maternal fever. I always dreaded its return to flare like a great blaze of light in my body: and now, here it is! Juliette, Juliette, how lovely it would be to see you come tip-toeing into this room, with that face of yours which can always rid me of fatigue and trouble, that roguish look, and your mouth distended by laughter. She loves to walk bare-footed on the floor: it amuses her to push those white and living little feet of hers from under her dressing-gown. In her body, the veins stay put in their proper places, and do not show on the skin, as mine do. The first time I ever took my clothes off before a woman I felt far from proud of the too obviously visible network of my veins and arteries. I can still hear her saying: "Ooh! you're all veined like marble!"

"You're lucky he isn't a thief!"

With a living man on one side, and a dead one on the other, the house was well balanced. Neither side of the scale hung too low. Four o'clock already! What a night!

Simon was keeping Claire well in view. He sat

calmly drinking a bowl of coffee. He seemed to be in no hurry. A bird was singing somewhere, well out in the country: a distant trilling. François would have liked to get up and go to the window, but even that was too much of an effort. The bird kept up its call for a long time, and the night was torn to shreds by the sound. A dog barked, a cock emitted a hoarse, sharp crowing. The animals were protesting at the bird whose woes ought not to be allowed to disturb their sleep.

"Claire, who is this Jean the letter speaks of?"

François could make out quite a lot of the room. It was part kitchen, part dining-room, and was filled with skimpy pieces of furniture painted to resemble grained wood. The girl's father was leaning against the mantelpiece, close to the stove. He was patiently rolling a cigarette. His gestures were as precise and sharp as those of a flute-player. His large fingers with square tips were lovingly gathering up the scraps of tobacco. As an accompaniment to the delicate task on which he was engaged, he uttered a few disconnected words for the pleasure of saying something:

"Yes, Claire, that's the truth. . . . How often have I told you to leave the tobacco-jar open to let the moisture get in. . . . One can't play games with honesty and get away with it. . . . Come here, Claire."

Claire came into François's line of sight. She was still wearing the white wedding-dress which now looked rather shabby. She had done something to her hair. It was drawn back and fastened in a bun. It was as though she were posing for a photograph of some strange wedding which would never take place. She

seemed at last to be happy, freed from worrying. She stood before her father with her hands crossed on her stomach.

"Haven't I the right to love? I suppose that question seems shocking to you, because in this house love is regarded as superfluous. One comes here only to die, as though it were a public institution. If you are displeased with me, I will go away with Jean: yes, I shall leave with Jean."

The voluminous dress, with its straight, regular pleats, must be helping her in the struggle she was prepared to wage with parents who never exchanged a word except on matters of high importance. She had adjusted the tulle veil round her neck, and looked like an old-fashioned traveller. She kept her eyes shut lest they reveal an immense distress. She stood there with her head held high, ready to speak or to be silent as she might determine, unconcerned with the unsuitability of the setting. François thought: did I ever look like that? Did I ever brave my father for love? Did I ever let love drive me on to fight against anyone? Must love always be confronted by some supreme adversary whom one has got to outface or die?

"What I have to defend, I shall defend to the last. I will no longer hold my tongue as you would like me to do. I refuse. I say no."

"What do you refuse, my girl?"

"Everything. I refuse everything. I refuse you!"

Claire had once again shut her eyes. Perhaps she could see nothing but a great coloured palpitating stain covering the gleaming faces which were shining with anger. Perhaps she, too, had an old apple-tree

of which to think, like François's own, an apple-tree which, out in the country, blossomed long after its fellows, choosing its own time, its own season.

"Do let me finish this hem. The wedding can't wait, and your quarrel can. Don't keep on fidgeting, Claire."

But Claire had accepted battle. She could not creep away on tip-toe into a corner there to wait until hostilities were resumed at the right moment.

"I can stand no more!—with that dead man lying on a bed like a bundle of vegetables waiting to be tied up!"

François looked at Claire with tenderness and compassion. He was ready to take his place at her side, as an ally. But what could he do? How could he make her realize that he was prepared to help her, to take upon himself the responsibility for her rebellion? He tried to turn round, but the sharp movement brought the blood to his cheeks. It was like a spear-thrust in his side: the same pain since the beginning of the world, never varying. Like the thrust of a spear in his heart, in his head, in his lung, in his leg. I have never been able to describe to a doctor the precise nature of that pain. "Doctor, I feel as though, as though . . .", but I could never finish the sentence, and could only say: "it's like a stab!" That was the easiest way of putting it. But just as I was trying to describe it, the pain always stopped. "It's like . . . like . . ." and then the doctor would answer indulgently—"yes, I see":—and I would thank him with a tight little smile. "It's like a blow with a knife." I had found what I wanted to say, but the doctor had

gone. I remember my mother's death-agony. I am sure it was her I saw die, at home. I haven't invented it. The only words she kept on saying were: "Oh! the pain! . . . the pain!"—and everybody understood.

"Claire, tell me it's not true!"

"But it is: I am going to have a child."

"Whose child?"

"Jean's: it is our child."

Her mother, having finished the hem, heaved a sigh. She stuck the needle in the thick material of her needle-case. She dared not raise her eyes to look at her daughter, but stayed kneeling at her feet. Simon turned to his sister Marthe, sitting half-hidden in a winged chair.

"Go away, Marthe! or make some sound! You sit there like a statue: your silence is getting on my nerves."

Marthe got up. Her eyelids quivered under the glare of the light. She must have been dozing. She muttered:

"I knew it."

"What did you know?"

"About Claire."

"Why did you say nothing?"

"What do I matter in this house? If I'm to concern myself with everything that goes on . . ."

"With what, precisely?"

"With all that goes on here, all the edifying goings-on. I may be old, but I've got sharp eyes."

"What do they see?"

Marthe had gone into François's room. Simon shouted after her:

"What do they see? What do they see?"

François pretended to be asleep, but old Marthe came close to the sofa, and, when he opened his eyes, he noticed that she was young, in spite of her sickly complexion, her thin lips, her hair lying flat and silvered over her temples.

"Well, and what have you got to say?"

François opened his eyes still wider.

"I beg your pardon, madame? . . ."

"Mademoiselle, if you please. I am the younger. I left the door open just enough to enable you to watch at your leisure what was happening. I know what the end of it'll be: I have foreseen it for a long time. When that sort of thing begins in a family, it never stops—for this is not the whole story. The woman whom you see continually bent over her work, with a stern expression, faded hair, and eyes fixed only on her needle, the woman who carries misery like a charm about her neck, who pays her tradesmen punctually, and never smiles—has had a lover. He is lying in the room opposite at this very moment, your counterpart, but more lonely now than ever he was with her: a handsome fellow, the village cock for frustrated farm-wives, the local Don Juan."

François was now sitting up. He could feel Marthe's warm breath as she made these hideous confidences in a low voice to a perfect stranger, and with relish. The breast within her blouse was far from austere. Her skirt was narrow, as were her hips. Her body gave off the smell of a plant which has been for too long kept in water. But her face was the face of a child, smooth-skinned, pink and thin. Her eyes were short-sighted and with no trace in them of arrogance.

Her chignon was confined in a hair-net of the kind to be seen in country markets.

"What goes on in this house, mademoiselle, is no business of mine."

"Oh yes, it is. Maybe you have been sent by God to bear witness. We cannot keep this life to ourselves. A moment comes when it must burst into the light of day, when, in spite of us, a stranger must be present to see our infamy. Your being here in our house is a miracle!"

François was feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"I thank you for your hospitality. Very soon now I shall be able to start off again."

"But it is immediately, at once, that you will know everything! Time has nothing to do with all this. It is in the hands of God, because of you."

"Because of me?"

"Yes, and it is good that it should be so."

"But it has nothing to do with me, mademoiselle!"

François, propped on his elbow, gazed with anger at the distressed old maid.

"Do not fail me. It is necessary for me that you should be here, that you should agree to see everything. It is enough that one person should know, but that person must *truly* know."

There was a silence. François had let his head fall back upon the pillow, as though to indicate that the interview was at an end.

"You are young, and that is all to the good: you will not be influenced like older persons. I tell you again: Raymonde has had a lover, and he is there, opposite. Cross the respectable room which is before

your eyes . . . walk round the table, making sure to go into ecstasies over the daily stint of work, push aside the family arm-chair which is for the dead-beat to rest in, and open the door."

The familiar tone in which this menacing old maid addressed him, the honeyed voice dripping from her lips without a break, sickened François.

"I have already told you, mademoiselle, that I do not wish to know."

"From the moment you came into this house you were one of the family. We are all members of the same family. You cannot turn aside from what I have told you. You must assume responsibility, as we have done, and for the same reason."

"Mademoiselle, I am very tired. Will you be so kind as to let me sleep?"

"Sleep? Why did you come here? I will tell you. Either you were planning some evil deed, or you took refuge in this house for reasons which you dare not give. Am I right?"

"No."

Fever once more showed in François's cheeks, making them blaze. There was a pain in his chest as though it showed a gaping wound. If only she would leave me alone!

"Come now, you must believe me. You are no casual passer-by. You were expected."

"Who was expecting me?"

"I. I was expecting somebody. One cannot keep a secret all one's days, making of it one's only object in life, clenching one's teeth to keep the fatal word from escaping."

Seeing that François smiled, she went on:

"You think that I am a madwoman . . . but the truth is that this secret has worn us all to skeletons. Our secret is our only food: we have become parasites on our secret. My sister-in-law, Raymonde, has had a lover: Claire, too, has a lover: and I have had many lovers in imagination. My brother has a tyrannical mistress—his laziness. He sleeps with her, eats with her, goes about with her, makes love with her, a laziness such as no one has ever seen before, plump, in good health, alluring. The secret has infected everyone and everything—the village, the countryside, the world. Only my sister-in-law's lover is visible—lying there dead, dead in his home, having died for all of us!"

"How did he come to die?"

"That will have to be made clear. I cannot endure yet another secret. My devotion will not go to those lengths."

Marthe started to laugh. She seemed satisfied by what she had said.

"That is enough for to-night. I have told everything to the curé, in confession. But no secret can live in a grave. It needs our warmth, our appetite, if it is to retain its power to poison. The man lying in the next room made advances to my niece, to all the women of the village, of the parish. Only one really fell into his clutches: Raymonde. But she was like a log that has fallen into a pond. The man was terrified of her to the day of his death. Raymonde is made of stone; petrified through and through. It was he, let me tell you, who made the publicity for our dress-

making business. In that way he had the *entrée* into houses where women were pining away because marriage had left them unfulfilled."

"So what?"

Claire had just flung the two words at her father, like a challenge. Marthe whispered to François:

"I will come back: there is going to be a row! When I come, you shall tell me what *your* secret is, and everything will once again be marvellous, more marvellous than ever before."

She had flung the door wide open. She walked on tip-toe. Turning her head, she made a gesture which seemed to indicate that they were both in a plot together. François did not understand much of what he had been told.

What was the nature of Claire's suffering? Here she was, in another world, the world of innocence, the world of a child blinded by anger, her heart driven to despair, a remorseless world creaking like sand beneath her feet, a world through which there blows a wind from the high places, bringing back to it a tremendous promise. Claire was standing there for all to see, a complete being, with no hidden crannies in her, without tenderness, upright in all her vehemence and indignation. She stood there, facing her father, facing the dark night and the dawn which the first stirring of the breeze would bring.

"So what?"

"I beg of you, Claire, not to use such vulgar expressions."

Raymonde had paused in her sewing. She looked

up at the quarrelling pair as a casual passer-by might look at a street fight, determined not to become involved. She still had a pair of scissors in her hand. She seemed to feel the need for some familiar, some useful object to lay hold of.

"Mamma's the only one who can understand me!"

"I?—but I know nothing whatever about it, my poor child."

"Mamma!"

Claire flung herself into her arms.

"Save me!"

"Save you from what?"

"Save me, mamma!"

François was sitting up. A small door in the wall had just opened. It was covered with the same wallpaper. A child was looking at him. François recognized him: it was the small boy who had been the first person to address him in the entrance passage. He was in his nightshirt and was wearing an old pair of black sandals on his feet.

"You haven't seen a book lying about on the sofa or under the pillow, have you? It's got a cover with a picture on it. It's called *The Samurai of the Purple Sun*."

François felt under the pillow, but could find nothing.

"Perhaps it's fallen down between the sofa and the wall?"

But there was no trace of a book. The boy seemed annoyed, and made a clucking sound with his tongue, indicative of disappointment.

"Don't stand there, young'un."

"Why not?"

François hesitated, cast a hurried glance at the scene taking place in the next room, at poor Claire who had collapsed on her mother's lap. He could see the dressmaker's hand lying along the girl's neck, a hand to which idleness gave a rather ridiculous look.

"I want to go to sleep."

"I don't."

"Why not?"

"My Aunt Marthe sleeps in the same bed with me. She has nightmares, and her mouth keeps on making a noise like she was blowing through a hollow tooth. Then she scratches herself, it's her arms tickle most. She says that life scratches at her like that. What have you got in your pockets?"

François smiled. He took from his trouser pockets some letters, a handkerchief, two cigarettes, and an advertisement for cough-drops.

"Haven't you got any objects?"

"What do you mean by objects?"

"Things, *real* things. I have. I've got a top with feathers, some nuts, a wooden spoon for eating ices with, and a cinema ticket. Have you a treasure of your very own?"

"No."

The boy seemed sad. He looked up. His eyes were now bright and reassuring. They were blue and showed with particular vividness in contrast with their black lashes.

"Would you like me to give you what I've got in my pockets?"

François thanked him, but politely refused the

offer. "I'm going now: you can carry on with your listening."

The child withdrew with a majestic gait, but before he vanished, he turned and came back to the sofa. There was a look of embarrassment on his face.

"You're like the man what's dead. You don't laugh."

"Nor do you, son."

"You keep your mouth open."

"The better to eat you with!"

The imp burst out laughing.

"What's your name?"

"Paulo. It's my birthday to-morrow. Grown-ups do forget so! Please tell them that to-morrow's my birthday."

François made an affirmative sign. He held the boy back by one arm.

"Tell me, do you know who that man is?"

"Yes: he comes here every day and every night for ever so long. I don't like him. He smells of holes."

"Holes?"

"Don't you know what a hole is? Holes always smell."

"Is he a cousin, an uncle?"

"A cousin, like Jeannot."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I don't, either."

"How old are you?"

"Ten."

François wanted to ask another question, but the child's untroubled face went to his heart. Nothing could disturb that fearless gaze, those well-shaped eyes; certainly not domestic angers. He was sunk in his life up to the neck, already armed against silence,

against the kiss withheld, against the world of grown-ups. Clearly, he had an answer to everything. He was as quick as a riposte: his strong little legs were firmly planted on the ground.

"Are you happy?"

Paulo looked at François in astonishment. What a ridiculous question! François could have kicked himself for talking like a grown-up.

"Your mother's nice, isn't she?"

"Yes."

The boy made off, and François found himself feeling more alone than he had done since he first entered this strange house. Silence had come back. Perhaps between now and daylight he would have a little peace. He closed his eyes. The lids were faintly smarting. Was it sleep touching his eyes with its unobtrusive fire? He could see a strip of brightness under the little door which Paulo had shut behind him. When I have a son—and I most certainly shall—it will be the best reply I could make to my father, to the night which stands to attention outside the home of my boyhood. Juliette wants a child, though she must have had more than enough of my childishness. She doesn't regard me as an adult. We can't be for ever two lovers at a window: we're already developing fads. She hates me to walk about in my socks or not to shave as soon as I get up. She's got a terrible way of taking back things to the shop where she bought them, with that famous phrase of hers: "on second thoughts . . ." She likes me to do it for her: I'm so good at putting back wrapping-paper in its original creases, and untying string and tying it up

again. She never knew that I threw the compact she so much wanted into the Seine rather than return it to the leather-goods store and change it for the one that was displayed in the window on a piece of crimson velvet! I told her it had been stolen in the Metro. Then she likes getting illustrated magazines from the man at the corner, and giving them back to him after looking at the pictures. "People buy quite enough papers from him!"—has become a well-worn formula with her. Everyone knows it: I know it. She's faddy about flowers, too. She changes the water in the vase every day, and puts a piece of sugar in it. She says it gives them extra nourishment and improves their colour. She wipes the stalks, picks off the dead leaves and the crumpled petals. It's a regular floral toilet. I say to her: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself when there are other things so much more worth while doing—like reading the papers?" "I don't want to think of newspapers when I'm with you," she replies: "you're not the kind of man to set one brooding on war, or discussing government programmes, or that awful old Indo-China." "When we are married"—I murmur. That makes her furious. Then I say: "We are making something very fragile of our lives." She needs a child. I do, too. I'll let my father see nothing but his photographs. No child of mine shall ever go near him. My family ends with me—and begins with me. When a kid arrives, I shall weigh anchor. Then, good-bye to father, to the little silver spoons, the padded caskets, the old-fashioned embroidered linen—all the past that I don't want to have mixed up with my present.



won't keep my appointment with Fernand. See! here are those lachrymose letters he wrote in reply to the one I sent him with the news that I was going to have a baby, prudent letters, sensible letters, signed with the various nicknames he gave himself. He never put his real name except to his poor pictures. The number of times I must have sat for him, clothed and unclothed! What, I wonder, was he trying to find in my face with that savage brush of his? It was during his blue period, his "great" period. He surrounded me with darkness, thick gobs of broken shadow which he worked in with a palette-knife. That one letter, in particular: "Give up the idea of having a child, otherwise I shall be compelled to give up painting. No artist has the right to come to terms with life. An artist has got to follow his own line through to the very end. Pictures are the only children I shall ever have." And what has he made of his painting? He has wiped his brushes on all the sheets in which he rolled with his docile little drabs. He has never sold a picture except to my mother, who is afraid of him, of his cynicism, of his equivocal gestures, of his great beard which hides a womanish chin. What a relief it will be to that fine

artist when my child is dead. He could never have lived with *that* kind of heart, a heart which must be the very image of his father's, an impossible heart without a trace of tenderness in it. That letter again: "I started for Italy without telling you. I have a rendezvous with Giotto and Cimabue. A party of Americans have taken me on as their guide. I met them at our little restaurant, the one kept by Madame Amour. Not a word to her about what I owe. I confide my canvases to your care, but have you any confidence in them?"

Surrounded by those pictures I realized the sort of man he was. His pictures do not lie. I discovered among them a sketch of me. What a revelation! It shows me naked. Inspired, perhaps, by a cave-drawing, he has coarsely outlined my enormous belly, with the child showing through it like a watermark. I had left his studio by way of the garden on to which it looks, a garden filled with gloomy irises. The concierge called out as I passed. She had a letter for me which she handled so clumsily that I could see she was holding a whole packet of envelopes. I realized the truth at once. He had written a series of letters to me, in advance, and the concierge, in return for a liberal tip, was to serve me up a slice of this epistolary pie each day!

He loved me in his way: but it was not a very good way.

My poor François! never let yourself wonder what sort of a woman it is that you love. I know that we can be happy only when we are together, with, for me perhaps, a little lump in the throat, a small

clutch at the heart, as a tiny memento of the dead past.

If only we don't become so sunk in familiarity that we end by reflecting ourselves rather than each other, like trees growing above water! Our love is too much inclined to laugh at itself, François darling.



At long last Simon had lit his slightly soggy cigarette. He was making his preparations in silence. His lips moved as though they were rehearsing the words they would have to speak. His gross face, in which everything was too thick, too broad, too red, was a wall through which not the tiniest trace of feeling could penetrate. He was as much shut away from himself as from others.

There he sat. François felt overwhelmed by these preparations for a scene which each of those involved would tear to pieces like ravenous animals.

If they are to live they must have death. They are all cornered by existence, each trying to force death upon the others, to kill, without respite, the angelic countenance in which they, none of them, any longer believe. What matters to them is that they shall, all of them, die, that they shall never cease dying, and that dead, they shall die over again.

But no blood flows. It did that long ago. Simon will get as close as possible to the death-agony of each member of his family, will instigate it, give it a name. I often used to want to be in the position, where my father was concerned, of making the choice. His face led me so easily to the very brink of death, driving

me on. I longed for my indignation to remain undiminished, I wanted to get to grips with him. Like those insatiable pastures which lie gasping for a fall of rain, and then, when the rain has come, lose the better part of their flocks, change colour, exude a nauseating stench of mud, become like a mass of greenish gruel—so did the anger for which I was waiting, as I might have waited for the Messiah, make me vulnerable, make me other than I wished to be. I, too, changed colour; everything slipped from my grasp. Rage had filled me too completely, with the result that now I could not use it. I lived with my father in the deadly fear of naming the nature of my suffering, of giving to it a unique, a visible body.

"Give me your word that you'll never see that young no-good again."

"Leave her alone, Simon, and go to bed, all of you: we'll talk about this to-morrow."

"You must swear it, Claire! Bring me a Prayer Book so that she may swear on that!"

François wanted to laugh at Simon's ingenuousness. He was actually proposing to make his daughter take the oath, like the President of the United States! I remember how once, when I had told a lie, my father made me go and work with a farmer who cultivated the land next to ours. His name was Jérôme. We used to go ploughing at dawn, without troubling our heads about what time it was. I walked beside the horse, holding the bridle, with Jérôme behind, putting all his weight on the plough so that the furrow should be straight and properly traced for the sowing. I kept close to the horse, rubbing against the magni-

ficient flanks which quivered when I touched them. What *was* that horse's name? I ought not to have forgotten, it wasn't that long ago. By Jove, yes!—it was called Simon—same name as this fellow's! I talked to Simon the horse, and he listened. For the most part I complained about my father, told him how he chided me and slapped me, and the beast nodded his head which was like a fiddle-case. Sometimes his slobber dripped down over my jersey. I loved the way he moved. He was so much more sure-footed than I was. I even tried to imitate him, but I kept tripping. The clods of earth were friable under his hooves. He had an enormous eye, as round as a tumbler, and always filled with something of sunlight or fever. I have never had a better companion than that horse. He did not exert the whole of his strength but drew the plough as though the two of us were just taking a stroll. One day he put his cold, moist nose on my shoulder, and I was frightened of the enormous, dark mass pressing against me. But such familiarities were rare. He looked at me out of the corner of his calm and gentle eye. I told him more than I ever told my confessor. I just explained things, and he moved his ears. The hair of his mane was wet at the roots. He knew everything about me, and it was only when I was close to his steaming, healthy flank, that I became transparent, without any trace of obscuring darkness. The farmer, walking behind, had no idea of what was going on. I could see his shrewd face under the brim of his faded felt hat. He must have been talking to the earth, the clods, the moles, and dreaming of the early sowing. Sometimes we would pick up the stones

which we found in our path, and make little heaps of them. He wanted his land to be clean, and to drive his furrow with the care of a woman preparing the cradle for her coming child. He could not endure the thought that one single blade should come up badly, should be impeded by a sharp-edged pebble. One day he found some pieces of shaped flint, a polished axe-head turned up by the plough. He looked at them for a while, as a craftsman looks at a piece of work well done. I was dying to be allowed to take them away with me. "I could show them to the schoolmaster." I looked so beseechingly that he held them out to me. I kept this priceless treasure for some weeks. It was my father who deprived me of it. I expect those fragments are still in his study. I'll get hold of them to-morrow even if it means breaking the glass of his bookcase.

François sat up. Claire had just come back into the room. The wedding veil hung round her like smoke. She rushed past the sofa like a whirlwind.

"You've seen the last of me, papa. . . ."

Her father was in hot pursuit, as though she were a domestic animal.

"I'll . . ."

Her mother was leaning against the door-frame: her hands were clasped.

"Simon, don't talk such a lot of nonsense. . . ."

For a moment Claire turned her head with a flash of dilated eyes, then stormed into the passage. A door slammed.

"Claire! Claire! . . . the dress!—the dress I've got to deliver to-morrow! . . . You're mad, Claire!"

. . . Catch her, Simon! . . . Claire, don't do this to me! . . . Dear God, what shall I do!"

Simon approached the sofa, took François's arm and shook him.

"Enough of this shamming sick, young man: you've got to help me find her."

François lowered his feet to the rug, laced up his shoes after first fishing them out with difficulty from under the sofa, then stood up, swaying. With one hand he gripped the back of a chair.

"You coming?—it'll be light soon."

The dressmaker was standing in front of François, thanking him.

"Whatever you do, don't, I beg of you, let any harm come to the dress. Claire is strong, nothing much can happen to her: but, oh! the dress, monsieur, the dress!"

By the time François had got outside the front door, he was panting. Simon had started off down the road, muttering:

"She'll make for the river."

A dog barked, and all the countryside, drowned in the excessive mildness of the night, took on the consistency of trembling, impalpable flesh. The cold was bitter now, before the dawn.

"Why should everything have to happen to-night?"

"We'll find your daughter for you."

"And the dress, too, the dress—otherwise there'll be no wedding to-morrow, and then, where shall I go, what shall I say?"

"You'll say there's been a death in the house."

"A death, that's easily said."

"Everything'll be all right, you'll see."

"All right!—when the hand of God or the Devil is on us."

"You had to do what was necessary for the dead man."

"There was nothing *to* do. He collapsed, just as I was finishing the train. He didn't cry out as anybody else would have done. Oh no!—he had to be as silent about his death as he had been about a number of things. There's been silence for too long in this house—and to-night all starts talking."

She hid her face in her hands. François did not know what more he could do for this shadowy figure at his side, all shaken with grief. He felt much better, and rid of his fatigue. He drew her hands away from her worn face.

"Ah! monsieur, in this family no one forgives and no one forgets. This is the first time I've ever spoken like this . . . a few hours ago I should not have dared to do so, but now . . .

"The dead man was Claire's father, and Simon knew it. I am sure that the whole village knew it, too—but how could they throw it in my face, seeing as how I made clothes for all the women for miles round? The secret longing to have a dress which was better made than those of their neighbours, kept them from giving me away. I have always been able to keep my life secret thanks to the thread, black or white, with which I festoon my bodice."

She relapsed into a momentary silence, and gave François a long look.

"And now everything's coming into the open. Because of this wedding-dress all the tongues will start

wagging. This is only a beginning. There's not a woman but will get her own back on me. No more dresses, no more silence! You, monsieur, are perhaps fortunate in having an irreproachable family—a mother and a father who can sit at their ease with folded arms and hear no whispering voices."

François had moved away when she began her confession, and now stood leaning his back against the metal filigree of the door.

"Yes, my father is irreproachable, too irreproachable: not a word can be said against him, but there's no particular advantage in that."

Raymonde seemed afraid to say anything more. François could see the pale glint of her eyes, the fragile cheekbones with the skin drawn tight, the look she had of a needlewoman in an old song. She put her hand over her eyes, and the shadow on her face grew darker still.

"These dratted eyes which are going back on me!"

"You must have them attended to."

"Attended to! attended to!—they've got to hang on to the end. That's what eyes are for, and the spirit, too, and the heart. . . . You come from Paris, monsieur. Tell me, do you know of any organization to which I could apply when I can see no longer? I am going blind. There *are* such places. But, no: the village will have to look after me. There will be no lack of arms to help me cross the street. Insults are only for those who have their sight."

She seemed now to be quite lost. She took a few steps as though to follow Simon, but suddenly sat down upon the step like a beggar-woman.

"Go and find Simon—that's what you must do. When you are back with your family you will forget this horrible night. Are you married?"

"Not yet."

"When happiness comes, do not try to do anything—anything at all."

"But I am happy now."

"Ah, yes, of course! I have thoughts for nobody but myself."

A voice was shouting in the distance, Simon's:

"What the devil are you up to!"

The dressmaker went back towards the door, her arms dangling.

Her poor eyes were gazing fixedly at the misty landscape which seemed to be scarcely held in place by the black, gleaming tree-trunks and the close-knit foliage of the clipped and compact hedges. The pupils were turned upwards as though in death. In her gaze was astonishment and wonder. She was looking for the sheer pleasure of looking, no longer now to guide her needle: a purposeless looking. François now, in his turn, plunged into the half-light, walking slowly.

Walking did him good. Only once in his life had he gone out shooting, and then, as now, he had drunk in the sharp, tasteless air. Claire must be a long way off by this time, running through the wet grass, the ceremonial dress showing white, and startling the wild animals disturbed by her passage. A white and unreal woman moving through a fragile countryside already touched by the fierce fires of autumn, and vanishing into mist, a ship without a crew!

François was no longer conscious of any sense of

suffering. It was as though by leaving the house he had been freed from the cold fetters of his childhood. He was off in pursuit of a young woman who had had the courage to break away from the gloomy weight of her family. To-morrow, or, rather, to-day, I shall be with my father, tucked away in a house no less extraordinary than the one I have just left. A short round of the garden, a brief exploration in the direction of the wood where the ground was spongy, with, all around, the smell of early mushrooms, a few minutes of silence by his mother's grave, and then it would be all over. I shall go back to Juliette. She must be waiting for me. I only hope she will have gone to her friend, Micheline. I don't want her to be entirely absorbed in waiting for me with a beating heart. I will ask the paternal permission to take her back some small memento, like a tourist.

"Hullo! what are *you* up to?"

François was suddenly startled into wakefulness by Simon's voice. He was beginning to grow used to the darkness. The sky seemed to have grown firmer among the denser clouds. He crossed a small field of shaven grass, and entered a little wood ringed by a bank and a growth of prickly bushes. Simon was calling to him, and François sent back several answering shouts. He was now among a stretch of stunted oaks with boughs that swept the ground, clumps of chestnuts with long and sodden leaves. He did not feel comfortable in this slithery world where he was grazed and brushed by growing things. Soon he came upon an expanse of bracken which got between his legs and made progress difficult. Some of their fronds had turned white.

A pleasing smell of mushrooms rose from the earth which lay, chaste and timorous, beneath an ancient coverlet of leaves. Something about this walk went to his head like wine. Only a faint touch of weariness made his eyes smart. He plunged into the low-roofed forest, as into the sea. He pushed his way through the branches and the high weeds. Daylight was beginning to show like a smoky candle. A bird pierced the silence with its song. François was no longer thinking of anything. He surrendered to the magic of the yielding moss beneath his feet, of the greyish mud in small clearings, of intersecting, reuniting paths which were like the fingers of a hand. Nothing now had any importance. All that mattered was to reach the man who was waiting for him a few yards away. In his nostrils was the smell of a waterlogged and delicate undergrowth. He made his way across a thick carpet of soft heather. His shoes were soaked through. All of a sudden he saw Simon, leaning with his back against a dead pine. He had opened a haversack which he carried slung against his leg, and was leaning down.

"This is the best place for *cèpes*, look."

François was amazed by this cordial reception.

Triumphantly, by the faint flicker of a cigarette-lighter, Simon pulled from the ground a plump mushroom with a white underside which looked like the belly of an animal.

"We shan't return to the house empty-handed: come along."

François walked beside Simon in silence. This search in which he had joined out of pure politeness, was beginning to look rather foolish. Claire was

hurrying to the scene of her former pleasures. François had seen clearly enough that the expression on her face was not that of one bent on self-destruction. She had had to defend her life against the death which must have risen to face her from the heart of her anguish.

"She must have gone past the Repos farm, and taken the main road. I know her. She's practical-minded. Her mother has taught her to make her life, as one might make a dress, out of borrowed material: and it suits her."

François was beginning to get short-winded. Simon took long strides. He knew where to plant his feet in the thick tangle of weeds.

"I know this place like the back of my hand. I come here shooting. On our way home I'll show you the best fields for partridges. Silly of me not to have brought a gun. You fond of shooting?"

François had to confess that he had shot very little, for the very simple reason that there was nowhere in Paris where one could go shooting.

"I couldn't stick living in Paris: no open spaces."

François looked at the fat man at his side who was so skilfully making his way through the dense undergrowth, and so obviously enjoying this nocturnal expedition.

"Are you really. . . ."

François hesitated:

"Are you really looking for mademoiselle Claire?"

Simon kept his eyes on the ground.

"I ought to be looking for her, and I am looking for her."

"You aren't very fond of her, are you?"

François was finding it difficult to keep up with the agile Simon. He slipped in a patch of bog, but the dead leaves softened his fall. A big stone grazed his cheek. He scrambled to his feet. His clothes were covered with patches of wet, sandy soil. He managed to get level with Simon who had not even noticed his absence.

"I can't keep up with you: leave me on the main road."

Simon was whistling softly to himself. Suddenly he raised his fat, leathery face and sniffed the air.

"Wind from the east: don't you catch that whiff of charred wood?—comes from a farm nearby which was burnt down last week."

François stopped. He was panting, and found it difficult to recover his breath.

"What's the trouble, young man?"

"Please forgive me. . . ."

"You don't look particularly tough. Look here, I'll go on. You'll be all right—can't possibly go wrong: just turn off by the Morin house—you can see the place from here, that dark mass. That's where the young no-good Jean lives. I'm pretty sure Claire's run straight to him. Still, one never knows, and I'd better have a look at the pond. She may have done herself in just out of stubborn pride. I know her."

He gripped François by the arm: "I say, what if I didn't go back? . . . *that'd* be a good joke: the girl first, me second . . . what'd our fine dressmaker look like then, eh?—no more family for her, all just melted into thin air. . . . Then, a lot of private things

are going to be on view now, and they're not a nice sight, innards aren't. The human spirit's a bit like game—goes high if it's kept too long. I'd had all I wanted of that sort of thing by the time I got back from the '40 war, I can tell you! . . . Oh! that '40 war! The number of Boches *and* birds I'd managed to poop off at! Then I got captured. Pretty tough time I had, too. Five weeks shut up in the Saint-Quentin barracks. Then they let me go. The Boches had all the prisoners they could do with: I was one too many. I worked my way across France on foot, poaching and looting. Wonderful time that was!—the whole country to pick from. All on my own, I was, out in the country, in the farms, in the cottages: entered without knocking, like the Marquis de Carabas. Extraordinary how alike all houses are once you get to know 'em: same kitchen with its iron range like a spider, same bedroom, always with a wardrobe and a locked drawer, where I usually found the marriage-lines, same loft always with the same smell of nuts and apples. I went through the land like a conqueror while those nice gentlemen's tanks rumbled along the roads. I wore different clothes every day: one morning I even togged myself up in an old wedding-suit to go tracking down chickens which had gone wild. I slept in every kind of bed, from straw palliasses to rubber mattresses. Wonderful days! I made my way home by short stages, pushing a child's pram stuffed with good things. It was then I realized what had been going on. The dressmaker—that's my wife—had made a new life for herself, with that stiff way back in the house, the good family friend. Djd

all she knew, she did, to get rid of me—even denounced me to the Gestapo. An Alsatian interpreter told me he'd seen a letter from my wife which the Germans had torn up and thrown into the waste-paper basket. A bit too much, it was, even for them!"

He stopped, and gazed at the horizon which was slowly growing lighter. A gusty little wind had got up.

"Pity there isn't a *bistro* open hereabouts. I'd have told you the whole story over a bottle, I would—good stuff, mind you, none of your Vinorex! Taught you a lot it would have. There's a packet a youngster like you can learn from a chap like me who's stuffed full with information about life. Missed my chances; ought to have been a rolling-stone. To cut a long story short, this is the first time I've ever caught that dead bloke at home, in my bed, if you get my meaning. Another thing, there's a girl I know. I'd marry her, I would, and start life over again on the level. The dressmaker's a sick woman. I knew she was going blind: used to knock against the furniture—thought at first she'd taken to drink. I've seen the doctor—she won't last long. That's why I ought to be thinking about the future—so's not to be caught napping. But I don't want to give you a fit of the blues, my young friend. There's a good God somewhere—don't make any mistake about that. I shall marry again. As a matter of fact, I take that girl of mine along with me to Mass: we want everything to be above-board—not in the village church, of course: oh no, we go further afield where we can hear sung Mass. Then there's Marthe—you've seen the old image—with the sour face of an old maid and dam' few teeth. She's settled

down on us good and proper. Before she came, there was granny—frighten the life out of a regiment, she'd have done: used to grind her teeth. Every morning, about midday, she'd go through the dining-room with her chamber-pot in her hand, without a word of apology—a proper old domestic pet, I give you *my* word! Never spoke to me, and chattered away in dialect. Must have found me a bit of an embarrassment, because I'm generally regarded as a pretty good spouter. Not the sort of family you'd expect a dog to live with. The hell of a life it was! But there's a big change coming: misery left in the corner with the brooms and the dishcloths, and a new set-up somewhere else. I'm the hopeful type, I am. Shut up the old home and make a fresh start, that's my motto!"

Suddenly they heard a loud cry. The whole countryside seemed to come alive in a moment. A dog barked, a cock crowed, and others answered it. In the distance they could hear a lorry: from the sound, it must be chugging up a hill.

"Hear that?"

"Yes."

"It was quite close: we'd better go and see what's up."

"Where do you propose to look, young man? Suppose you think it's Claire, that it can't be anyone *but* Claire, that every cry we hear from now on's bound to have come from Claire's choking throat? Don't go getting into a state. I'd have recognized Claire's voice all right if it had been hers. But she's not the kind to start shouting—more likely to do a faint.

She's one of those emotion or anger makes dumb. Prefer to pass out in silence, she would, which is the sensible thing to do, because when somebody's unconscious one has to touch their face, pat their cheeks, and show concern for 'em."

Silence had returned. Day was breaking. The night's skin had a softer look. The sky was showing white in the east. The clouds were slowly breaking up. François was trembling. All of a sudden it seemed to him that ever since the day of his birth he had been wandering along a road which had no end. Fatigue was making his eyes smart. His lips were beginning to go soft, feeling the teeth behind them. He would dearly have loved to lie down again, but the rain had made the ground sopping. Puddles had formed between the islets of thick, sodden grass. And to think I might be waking with Juliette at my side, might be gently pinching her neck, desiring her without fierceness, with the morning light on her warm, consenting flesh. What day is it? I left Paris on Friday. But that was yesterday: I feel as though I'd been away for weeks: time can play the oddest tricks. This must be Saturday just coming up. I must be back at latest by Sunday evening—in other words, to-morrow. If I could take some table-silver back with me, Juliette'd like that, the sort of stuff nobody uses now, great dishes on which to carve enormous joints and not little unobtrusive urban scraps. Perhaps papa might give me a worn-out old service, with deep-bowled spoons, a ladle, a tart-scoop. It'd look well in the sideboard drawer. Nowadays nobody has soup, and one eats tart with one's fingers.

François found himself alone, seated on a milestone. Simon had vanished. But he had said something about a rendezvous. Frogs were quietly croaking somewhere: the sound was regular and monotonous. An animal hurried across the road, almost colliding with François—must be a hare. A gun went off close at hand.

"Seen a hare come this way?"

François looked with amazement at the figure standing before him, accoutred with haversacks and cartridge belts, and holding a threatening-looking gun.

"Yes, I saw a hare run past, and felt the wind of a charge of shot."

"You'd no business to be on the road at this hour. No time for a saunter. Looking for work?"

"No, I'm looking for a woman."

The sportsman guffawed loudly.

"Excuse me. In any event, it wouldn't have killed you: just a few pellets in the calf, that's all."

"Many thanks: I'm much obliged to you."

François started to whistle, but the other did not move.

"I know you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

The sportsman treated François to a far from friendly stare.

"Everyone knows you hereabouts."

"Me?"

"No doubt about it."

François was beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable.

"I assure you you're mistaken."

"Oh no, I'm not!"

"But I don't live in these parts."

The sportsman smiled. Not for a moment did he take his eyes off François's set face.

"You've been a familiar figure here for a long while."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

François's uneasiness increased. The spot was lonely. He looked round him. The famous Morin house was no more than a few hundred yards away. Under the diffused light of the early day its walls were taking on life and colour. Should he make a run for it?

"This isn't the first time by a long chalk that you've been caught red-handed. You're an object of considerable interest to quite a lot of people."

Things really were beginning to look bad, thought François. Here he was, suddenly invested with a terrible identity, with an equivocal past, though of what nature that past was he had not the slightest idea.

"But it's going to cost you dear, my friend: I give you fair warning."

"Warning of what?"

"Don't you start trying any bluff!"

"But what have I done?"

The other said nothing, and François could control himself no longer.

"Go to hell! I certainly don't know *you!*"

"You'd better not adopt that tone with me: I have proofs on me. What about this?"

The sportsman fished out of his game-bag a length of wire and a strangled hare with a white, soft belly. François took the animal and stroked it. It was the first time he had ever handled a small body smelling of trodden heather. There was sand on the pelt, and it stuck to his fingers. The ears had a broken look. It came to him suddenly, with a stab of pain, that what he was holding was his own dead childhood. Like this poor beast, it had been strangled. Everything came back to him on an extraordinary surge of emotion against which he could not fight. Tears welled up in his eyes. This animal was proof that what he was concerned with now was nothing but his own life. His past had been in the hands of poachers. A hare had died for him. . . . He remembered how his father had delighted in poaching, not from any necessity, but in order to taste the pleasure of destroying things in secret. He had often seen him returning from the woods at dawn, with an ecstatic expression on his face, and his pockets filled with snares. A mousy smell would hang about him all day long. This fellow with the gun must have taken him for his father, a young and lively father who moved through life with bared teeth and moist lips. I never noticed it, but it's perfectly true. The lower part of his face is that of a beast of prey. This hare is one of his victims. Perhaps he meant to keep it for the birthday dinner. He hadn't had time to go and look for it. In eating this hare he would have been eating me as well. That's what papa looks like when he stands before me, fierce and ready to pounce. May he die alone, as he left us to love alone. I had to learn

love: I had to walk blindly, as I have been walking through the darkness of this night, and all the while, he was going about with snares, with dead animals, with a dead wife, keeping his hand in with Death.

"It is my father."

"What d'you mean, your father?"

"It's he: a maniac. He was for ever on the watch in the hope that one day we might become the victims he had marked down for slaughter!"

The man with the gun took hold of François by the lapels of his wind-cheater.

"And you, I suppose, were the bag? Come along with me."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the police station, to give an account of yourself."

"But my father is a well-known figure in the district."

With a sharp blow he broke from the other's hold. The gun fell to the ground at his feet. He ran, not looking where he was going, across a stretch of open land where heather grew like tufts of fleece. A shot rang out, but he was already far away, deep in a little wood. An enormous walnut tree spread its branches over him. He could hear the dull thudding in his puny chest of the heart that was trying to leap from its cage. Several nuts fell to the ground, their shells bursting as they struck it. Their bitter smell filled the wood. He waited for a few minutes, then quietly made his way back to the road. He had but one idea in his head, to get into the house where Claire might have sought refuge. Rain had begun to fall, a misty,

insinuating rain, wetting his hair and his hands. The countryside, feebly illuminated by the growing day, seemed as though diluted by the misty shower. A rosy glow showed between the drops. The walls of the house towards which he was making his way had, like everything else, taken on the colour of coral. The horizon was beginning to burn bright.

François wanted to ring at the gate, but there was no bell. With a single leap he got over the wooden fence. The garden smelt of pulped fruit, of fermenting apple-juice. He went along a path which led to a small porch. The front door was standing open. All the same, he knocked, at first gently, then more noisily, but there was no answer. In the state he was in he was afraid of meeting somebody and asking whether "a young girl has taken refuge here". He saw himself in a large oval glass spotted like an apricot. His hair was tousled and sticky, and his long face to which fatigue had given a polished look, seemed smooth and fallen-in. He passed his hand through his hair and tried to tidy his clothes which gave off a strong smell. He had left his tie in the dressmaker's house, and the ends of the neckband of his shirt showed like two long spikes over the collar of his wind-cheater. In front of him was a narrow staircase with a handrail of crimson velvet, and a carpet. The house was light and welcoming: difficult to resist. What an interior! François was charmed by the bunch of flowers set on a low table: roses which had the simple look of childhood. He climbed the staircase, making a good deal of noise, and reached a fairly spacious landing. A small chair, upholstered in velvet,

stood in one corner. This chair, with its back of warm-toned wood, and an oval of tapestry-work, this chair . . . François sat down, passed a hand across his forehead, and looked at the delicately modelled, narrow, staircase which swept in a light subtle curve to an end just in front of him. He had a vision of himself climbing it, with bare and bleeding feet and torn breeches, a small, unhappy François, with a narrow stubborn brow, sunken temples, and eyes innocent and harmless but already clouded with the mists of solitude. He got to his feet, recoiling from the ghost which was climbing the stairs with that terrible step of memory which he alone could hear. Utter silence filled the house. It was like suspended breathing, like a faint and flickering light touching momentarily the objects in its course. Through a small window cut in the staircase wall daylight showed, distant and precious, an oblique shaft of brightness which welled into the dark corners. It seemed to François that life was stirring again like breath restored to human lungs. *Someone* was waiting expectantly for his two hands which were groping their way along the walls, for his two hands on the latch of a door: someone was waiting, and now, at last, he had come.

A woman: Claire, wrapped in a dressing-gown. She was sitting, quite still, with her head in her hands, beside a desk.

"Mademoiselle Claire!"

She raised her face which distress had thinned to a point. She seemed to belong to another world. Her eyes, in which there was no sign of fear, were staring beyond him.

"Mademoiselle Claire, they are looking for you all over the place."

Her hands were now upon her knees, the fingers curved, as though she had just let fall some repugnant object. A combination of sweat and tears gleamed on her puffy cheeks. François crossed the floor in front of her, and threw the shutters open. A few spots of rain entered the room. The sound of falling nuts reached his ears from the little paddock below, deadened by the rain.

"Claire, what is the matter with you? Your mother is in a terrible state."

"I have killed him."

"Whom?"

"Jean."

François looked carefully round the room. There was no sign of a body.

"Pull yourself together, Claire!"

But she went on, imperturbable and icy:

"I killed him. Alice was with him."

François suddenly remembered the young girl who had been so good at crying in the first house where he had been hospitably received, Alice, the weeping fiancée. It all comes back to me now, the father's reference to a certain Jean. I am beginning to understand.

"You had a suspicion, Claire?"

"I knew nothing."

"Where is he?"

"I fired at him, or, rather, at her: that is all I remember."

It was Claire, then, and not the sportsman, who

had fired the shot. Whom had she killed? Jean, Alice, or this feeble little day which seemed to find it so difficult to get born? A gust of foggy air blew in through the window. François closed the casement. A smell of burnt powder still hung about the room.

"Where did you fire the shot? Here?"

"I shot at them from the window. They were lying together. I looked at them for a long time. They were asleep. There was a space between them. Both were sated with love. Only one thing bothered me, and that was how to get hold of the revolver which Jean had brought back from the war. His jewel, he called it. One day he said to me: 'I've left a bullet in one of the chambers, so that it shall always be a real revolver.' Then they woke up. I watched them take sudden fright when they saw me there, snatch up their clothes, and start running round in circles like rats caught in a trap, while I shouted abuse at them. Jean understood all right what was coming to him when he saw my eyes and my mouth. They took to their heels. The revolver was burning my fingers. I fired from the window just as they turned to look at me. Then, I undressed as usual. I found my dressing-gown, the one he had bought for me with so many precautions. I went through the same gestures as always: the one I had made when I fired was no more terrible than the others."

She paused, then continued, with less vehemence:

"Alice is mad, a woman with a mania. There's always some fellow following her about like a shadow, who never leaves her, who's always on the look out for her. She's a tart, that's what she is. What day is it?"

"Saturday, the 29th of September."

"On Monday the school term will be beginning. Jean is a schoolmaster—did you know that? I didn't kill him, did I?"

François tried to reassure her.

"I came here from the road. The front-door was open. You needn't worry: there was no blood on the road, and no corpse."

"Whom did I kill, then?"

She had risen to her feet, and was trying to close the neck of her dressing-gown, but there was no button to hold it together, and it fell open again. She held it round her throat with one hand.

"Are you married: have you a child?"

"No."

"But you are in love?"

"Yes."

"With just one person? and everything is going as you want it to?"

François dared not answer this rather too intimate question which she had put to him in a somewhat aggressive voice.

"Obviously, you've always been happy. Happiness doesn't come to order, and when one has it it doesn't wear well."

Claire stood without moving, with her eyes lowered. Suddenly she burst again into speech, impetuously, with the same pride which had already made it possible for her to stand up to her father.

"One gets frantic. One goes to bed with all and sundry, because one thinks that happiness hangs about like a woman on heat. . . ."

She rushed to the unmade bed, snatched up a rug which had served as a coverlet, threw it over the bed, and then, with a quick movement, flung the window wide.

"This place stinks!"

Part of the sheet showed under the coverlet drooping to the floor.

"It wasn't like that with me. Our love had a future. When morning came, it didn't frighten us: we didn't just yawn and part. Ours was a love which could keep things tidy, which could live an ordered existence, in a room with a well-polished floor. Jean!"

The name came from her lips like a whimper.

"Jean! Jean!"

She sat down in an arm-chair, slowly rubbing her belly. Her voice had a complaining note.

"When I was young I loved sleeping with flowers in my bed. I am really just a little girl, you know, I haven't changed. You must listen to me because I am only a little girl."

She closed her eyes. The look upon her face was one of unconcern. It seemed to express nothing at all. Into what inner world had she withdrawn?

"At the time of the general exodus we took to the roads. The Germans opened fire on us. My doll was killed. For a long time my arms were empty; then Jean came, and I have killed him."

"He's not dead, Claire."

"He is not dead, but I have killed him. The bullet will one day pierce his flesh, our flesh. What sort of a wound will it make? No, no, that's not true!"

"Think of your parents, Claire."

"My parents? My father?—you've seen him?"

François made no answer.

"The dead man on the bed, that's him."

"Stop it, Claire!"

"More dead than anyone has ever been. There were tears shed, but before, and in secret. That simple life of ours was very complicated."

François had laid his hand on Claire's shoulder. What a thin little shoulder it was, it seemed to melt under his touch. He thought about Juliette. Was she awake yet? what was she doing? She had marked on the calendar the date of his return. She had said to him, with tears in her eyes: "It mustn't happen again." This was the third time he had left her to go and see his father and to play the part of son. In this little patch of the earth's surface I have found everything again: a childhood dead and gone, a countryside in ruins, and over it all the night, a lunatic and solid darkness. What is young grows old more quickly here than elsewhere, giving to solitude and death kindly and unstable sureties, like this poor Claire. It is like a heavy cloak which one cannot lift, to which one grows accustomed, which hides within its folds all boldness, all temerity. Even love has a peculiar bitterness. Yet, these poor sureties wait under their scanty rags. What have I to do with this exhausted countryside? I belong to the sun. I have abandoned this dotard world. Let them play out their drama as they will! I wish to have no more to do with it! Let them settle down in this soft and shifting dust, and taint each other with corruption. I have had enough of feeling in my hand the roughness of the rope, of having

confidence only in a life where drama makes for itself a warm place in our hearts, all trim and dapper, tricked out and bedizened and glossy, a permanent, uninterrupted drama, an elementary drama in which death and solitude make carousal with our tears. Let us stake our chance on a little happiness, let us risk that!

François approached Claire with a feeling of embarrassment. She was on her knees.

"Are you praying?"

"I am pretending to."

"I don't understand."

"How can you expect me to pray? How can you expect me to behave otherwise?"

She had risen to her feet. There was something fixed about her smile.

"I don't like confidants. I have nothing to say to you."

François moved from her towards the door.

"I am going. What am I to say to your parents?"

"That you have found me well: that I will write to them."

"Why? Are you going away?"

"Where do you think I can go if I stay in this hole? Wait, take with you, over your arm, the lovely wedding-dress. The hem is a bit wet, but it will soon dry. I am putting you to a lot of trouble, am I not? Men don't like that kind of commission. It is still very early: you won't meet anyone."

"Would you like to have my address in Paris?"

"Yes, one never knows. If I were found on the steps of one of the Metro stations, I should at least have your address on me, a respectable address."

"I live—we live—at 11 rue Servandoni: that's in the sixth *arrondissement*. Ask for mademoiselle Juliette Carles: that's the name of my friend. We are going to get married soon. The studio is in her name."

"Going to get married, are you? Then take the dress, take it. . . . May all the girls in the world use it for their weddings. Take it. I give it to you. You must have a proper wedding, with parents, and family, and a bridegroom, and a priest in the background. Run along and get married; hurry! One should never leave anyone alone for too long: love is not to be held by absence. Don't lose a moment: go!"

Claire was panting: her pallor had become accentuated; her nose was red and swollen. There were dark rings round her eyes which were trying to hide from the harsh, intolerable light of the young day which was shimmering with sudden flashes on walls and ceiling, and in the garden. A cyclist was riding past the hedge. He had put his hands in his pockets, and was pedalling along without paying the least attention to his handle-bar. Claire was moving about the study with steps that were none too steady, holding on to the backs of chairs, to the black marble mantelpiece. She came to a standstill before the open window. At what was she looking so fixedly? François saw her throw back her head, as though she were in need of air. A robin has just perched upon the gutter, and was scratching about in it for food. There was a sudden cry. Claire had turned her head.

"There they are! They are coming back!"

She had slipped to the floor, and was kneeling with body bent, with her head drooping forward on her

breast, and hands open, in the attitude of a donor in some old picture of the Vision of the Virgin.

François raised her chin, called her gently by her name, artlessly patting her bloodless cheeks. He slipped his two arms under her body, and succeeded, with a great effort, in lifting it, with the legs dangling. He noticed a small circular scar on the big toe. I've got one, too: the mark of a blow which Adrienne once gave me with a shovel. It must be the scar of some injury she received in childhood. With difficulty he succeeded in carrying her into the next room where he laid her on the bed, the same bed which Claire had been in such haste to cover up. Her eyes were half open, and François could see the two pupils of a liquid blue with golden filaments. He drew the dressing-gown together over a small patch of exposed stomach, scarcely at all rounded, and of a harsh white colour. She was sleeping deeply. He stroked her forehead. She uttered a low moan, and then was quiet again. It was not worth waking her: better let her burrow in this kindly sleep. She was already dreaming. The lids had fallen over her eyes. A few sounds came from her, words which grew confused at the very moment of utterance. She turned her head sharply, and buried her face in the coverlet which her hands had rumpled.

Then, once again, François felt himself utterly alone in the deep recesses of this house which, under his insatiable gaze, was taking on a renewed look of youth. The old brightness was coming back to walls and curtains. The sunlight was now more violent. An oppressive radiance was sparkling in the

trees. A drunken wasp, swollen with sugar, was furiously buzzing in the room. The leaves were once again upon the trees which, touched by the heat, showed as great masses of thick and blackish green. Never, for many long years, had there been a summer like this. The roses scarce budded before their petals began to drop upon the ground which looked as though it were covered with red-hot ashes. The iris leaves hung down like thirsty tongues. Not a bird was singing, but the air was filled with the continuous vibration of insects round the windows, curtains, and the shining gleam of copper. Everywhere, the room was filled with a sparkle of light.

François's face felt blazing hot. The whole countryside had taken on the fierce exhausted look of seed-time. The sky had become impalpable, showing a dusty blue in the brilliance of this morning with its threat of thunder.

Ah! that herd of wandering cows which prevented me from running! I had got wedged into a corner under a carriage-entrance. A fly which had followed me when I left the house, had been with me all the way. There was no one in the village. The Angelus bell had rung. As I passed the butcher's shop, I heard the bead curtains at the door gently stir and tinkle. I could hear, too, the handle of his frigidaire drop and rise again with a sound that brought a feeling of peace. I stopped guilelessly in front of the tobacconist's window. A strong smell of pepper and string came from within, mingled with the scent of the dried-up forest, a scent of split and resinous wood. There was sweat on my nose. I had no handkerchief, and rubbed

it with my sleeve. At last I reached this house. I had gone there to see the old schoolmaster, who received me wearing a flat sailor's cap. He polished his spectacles for a long while before saying anything, puffing and blowing like an old seal. I went into his study, with its coronal of flies. He grumbly pushed aside the plate and the glass which were standing beside the exercises, *our exercises*, which he was correcting.

"What d'you want, François? Ah yes, I kept you in, didn't I, and you were to come here this morning to take your punishment?"

"I don't want to be kept in, monsieur."

"But you made a lot of mistakes."

"I don't want to be kept in . . . because of papa."

"Why? Your father must know about it. A punishment can never be kept secret. I can't let you off: it wouldn't be fair. What would the other boys say? You have been punished . . . but what have you got there in the pocket of your smock? . . . what is it?"

I fished out a live bird which I held out to the schoolmaster.

"I know that you are fond of birds."

"Are you trying to bribe me?"

"No: it's a bird out of a cage."

"I see: so, to make matters worse, you stole it?"

I said nothing: I was feeling thoroughly ashamed.

"Go at once and put that bird back in its cage."

"But you said, sir, that birds ought to be allowed to fly in freedom."

"So I did: but I did not tell you to steal."

"I didn't steal: I only wanted to give it its freedom."

The old schoolmaster gave a grunt.

"Let me finish my bit of lunch, and then I'll go back with you. I'll have a word with your father, because our fine gentleman doesn't want to be thought a youngster who's been punished."

He did go back with me, and, on the way, went into the tobacconist's, being a great smoker. Seeing the greedy look on my face, he bought me a screw of glossy paper, for which I was longing. I expect it contained two or three sweets, a little ring mounted with a ladybird, and a horoscope. But I never opened it. As soon as I reached home, I went and buried it under a clump of carnations in the garden. In this way I became the possessor of a treasure of which I alone knew the hiding-place. The schoolmaster did not say anything about the punishment to my father, but asked that I should be sent back to school in the afternoon, to do some work.

"He's got to learn to draw a map of the main rivers of France, with their tributaries"—he added casually.
Dear old schoolmaster!

François shivered. The heat had gone, and the sky was once more pale. There were no leaves now upon the trees. A bitter cold rose from the garden. Far off a cuckoo was calling. François felt in his pocket to make sure that he had got some money. It was a habit he had acquired in his childhood.

The house had again taken on its shabby and abandoned air. The rooms were full of the smell of over-ripe fruit. Autumn, once more, was snuffling round it with its cold nose.

If only I could sluice some water over my face I should feel better. He went into the kitchen, which

had an unusually high ceiling. He recognized the thin daylight creeping through the glazed transom. The window had been boarded up. The old schoolmaster had produced a little omelette on the big range. It was still sticky with old grease. The poor man had never done much washing-up.

François put his head under a tap. A cat which had taken refuge beneath the sink shot away when the first drops struck it. The water ran over his face and down his neck. He snorted. The old soap of his childhood was there to his hand, a granulated substance which it was difficult to work into a lather. It slipped like a fish from his hands which were numb with cold. He felt about and found a towel hanging on a nail, a rough-surfaced strip of material with which it took him a long time to dry himself. At last he succeeded in opening his eyes again, and set to work combing his hair before a piece of looking-glass set in a calendar. The kitchen was filled with a squalid smell of slops. The small brass taps of an old-fashioned range, perched on high legs, gleamed in the half-darkness. François fought against the emotion which was flooding in on him. A skimpy ham, hard and yellow, hung from the ceiling. He felt as though the house were watching him, agog for a cry of surprise, a fond gesture, a wondering stare. A sound of footsteps reached him from the next room, the soft flip-flop of well-worn felt slippers. The communicating door opened.

A woman, with a broom in her hand, halted on the threshold.

Her hair was bound in a check handkerchief. Her

black, shiny dress billowed round thin hips. She was diminutive, and her narrow bust was invisible under a fringed shawl. Only the lined peasant face, with its rich complement of wrinkles, showed signs of life in this mass of clothing in which her eyes seemed barely to show.

"I ask your pardon, I'm sure, monsieur!"

From the movement of her lips, which might have been those of a child, it was clear that she was trying to laugh. Her cheeks fell into creases, and went slack at the least touch of feeling. Her faded violet gaze took stock of François.

"You're not in my way, monsieur, not in the least. I can get on with the dining-room and the passage, and when they're done there'll be such a heap of things to do that I shan't know where to begin. You're wise to be up early. With this weather we're having, there ought to be mushrooms. Go across to the ruined house—but beware of them sportsmen as shoots like so many blind men. What'd you say to some coffee, a nice plump omelette and a crust rubbed with garlic? Garlic goes well with sunrise, and gives you a smell for the rest of the day. The earth doesn't have no smell, not when you're my age."

François wanted to say something agreeable, something to explain his presence in a house where he was not expected.

"Aren't you starting work rather early?"

"I gets everything done before the others. I like it that way, makes me feel I'm not so old after all. At six o'clock in the morning white hairs don't bother nobody. The older one gets the earlier one

ought to be moving. One's terribly frightened of not never waking at all, of being forgotten, like. I sleeps like my cat, ready to wake at the least sound."

François noticed that the old woman had three wedding rings on her left hand.

"Are you married?"

She started to laugh: the sound was like the rustling of dead leaves.

"What makes you ask that?—them wedding rings, I suppose? The first's mine, the second's my husband's, the third's my mother's. A wedding ring never does no harm to anybody, eh?"

She took an apple from the pocket of her apron, and proceeded to polish it on her sleeve.

"There's an apple tree grows by the roadside: plenty of fruit in the ditch always: 'tis the poor man's apple."

I know that face, that kindly figure, those little podgy hands. . . . I know that soothing look. . . . I know. . . .

François recollected the house perfectly. He had slept in this very chair: the velvet had pricked his legs. He had been running away. For the second time the old schoolmaster had given him sanctuary. It was one night when he had seen his father walking arm-in-arm with a shadowy woman on the garden path. I had been up for hours, waiting for her to go. I wanted to catch up with that woman and speak to her. I had put on my "sneakers" and the old army raincoat which still hung in the hall. I ran, until I came to a small wood. I forced my way deeper and deeper into the brambles which were making it diffi-

cult to walk. Ah! that grassy mud under my feet, the stinging whip of branches on my calves, the bird which took to flight at my approach; heavy, clapping wings! Then I found myself in this arm-chair, close to the hearth where a great funny crackling fire was burning.

She was staring hard at François's face.

"Don't you re kernize them door-knobs? You wanted to take them away. . . ."

François glanced at the knobs which once had held such fascination for him. They had been the very signs and symbols of luxury, brass knobs which looked like cold and glittering eggs.

"You'd drunk a bowl of hot chocolate on that there little table: the mahogany top was all blistered. They put a slip on it afterwards to hide the marks."

"The wind was blowing great guns, wasn't it?"

"Come to think, now, it was: wild enough to blow the tiles off the roof, and slamming of 'em down in the garden. You wore your hair cropped in those days."

"And I didn't want to go away?"

"That you didn't! You hung on to my skirt and clung to my bodice. One of the sleeves came unstitched: the stuff's always a bit wore away under the arms."

"And I said that my father had caused my mother to die?"

"That you did!"

"And they told the police and confronted me with my father. . . ."

"I tried to take off your attention with an old lighter which made a lot of sparks, but you soon got tired of it. . . ."

"And I repeated my lies?"

"You was in this very spot. I've not forgotten . . . one never forgets an unhappy child . . . there's a heap of unhappy mothers—they're of no consequence, but a kid looks funny like when he don't cry, and you wasn't crying. If I'd boxed your ears you'd have started sobbing, but crying you were *not*, not but what the tears was a-falling inside your little body. When you spoke it was like the sound of a tap what hadn't been properly turned off."

"There was a fire, wasn't there?"

"No, no: they'd lit a small stove, and I'd put a brass kettle on it, so's to have some hot water."

"I remember you. You were very tall, and you wore your hair in a bun which made a great impression on me—I kept on being afraid it would come down—and earrings which shook."

"The earrings is lost: the gold wore thin, and one day they fell."

François shut his eyes: his forehead felt damp. He had taken a great gulp of air into his mouth, and was making it whistle between his teeth.

The old woman had taken up a position behind the arm-chair in which he was sitting. She had her arms crossed on the back, like a presiding deity.

"I thought at first as you'd come for Monsieur Bordenave's little niece, her as was as mischievous as a cartload of monkeys."

"Who was Monsieur Bordenave?"

"The old schoolmaster what took you in. He used to confide in you."

"I don't mind confessing to you that I have forgotten the date of the Battle of Bouvines, and then, you know, I wasn't any too sure about that sum. As to dictation, I always make the same mistakes: they're my own special brand and follow me about like wasps." He was always nervous in the mornings, and had to remind himself what it was that he had got to teach. "First of all, I shall put them through their grammar, the rules governing the participles—that'll get me going" . . . People used to laugh at him because of his goitre. The kids made little noises at him as though he was a pouter-hen. I suffered for him; his distress seemed to me to be so real. As to my father, I left him to moulder in my lies. The police acted slowly and as though they were sorry to have to act at all. My father had a good name: his black suit and his unusually white hands inspired general respect. After being summoned once or twice to the police station with the deference due to him, my father was left in peace. He came in the evening and knocked at the schoolmaster's door, but I didn't want to see him again. One morning several gentlemen came into the room where I was sleeping. The schoolmaster stood at the foot of the bed like a benevolent god. His hand was resting on one of the wooden apples which decorated the uprights. Behind this mute invasion came my father. I was offered some barley-sugar which I refused. I could see that it had been bought in a hurry, without any choice. My father

was without a tie. I shall never forget that open collar and the long, skinny neck showing above his shirt. He looked the very incarnation of remorse. There was no authority in his look: it was as though he had lost all his funereal lustre. He questioned me himself with a gentleness I had never known in him before. He made no complaint. He seemed to have come from another world where he had left behind him his ice-cold strength of character, and his manias. He took my hand and clung to it, as though he wanted me to help him across a street, or a stretch of dangerous ground. I began to sob. I felt alone, terribly alone, with no one to give me aid, with an intolerable father whose gentleness at once grieved and nagged at me. I was not used to this attitude in him of speechless appeal, to those calm, vulnerable eyes, to that stiff gait. He seemed to be accepting everything from me, even my anger against him. He drained me like a gourd. I wanted to press his hand, but just then he withdrew it, and I realized that this attitude of his was all put on, that I should have to pay dearly for my crazy revelations.

Everybody wanted to get me to talk. They tried to make me admit more than I had made up. The questions were all soft-spoken, full of traps, and to them I opposed the violence of my tears. I buried my face in a cushion. I breathed in the very old smell of a woman's bodice. I begged God to keep me from saying anything—in those days I was on good terms with God—to take me away from this room where paternal affection was becoming more dangerous than any weapon. I cried for help, and the old school-

master kept on whispering to me—"It's all right, I'm here, don't be afraid, I'm here." It seemed to me that this scene had lasted for hours and hours. I fell asleep, and when I woke up there was a woman standing by me. She seemed to surround me with an aura of warmth and loyalty. I looked at her in a dazed sort of way. I heard her speak: "Nothing now can alter the fact that I am your mother."

"It was you? . . ."

The old woman smiled:

"I have a son: he is like you."

There was an expression of rapture in her wide-open eyes. They looked as though lost in a dream which had taken on life again just at the sight of a young man's face. With brutal suddenness she found again her solitude, her vanquished tenderness, a once loved and familiar presence, in any gaze directed at her. A lost son is always found again.

"No, don't go. They did their best to prevent me from recognizing you. . . . They told me you had been killed in the war. But the war has been over and done with for a long time. It's peace now, isn't it—yes or no? What, then, does your death mean? They even wrote to me that you had been killed. It's shameful to write things like that to a mother. There's not a mother but mightn't have died of it. A child born out of wedlock, oh! that didn't count. You didn't appear on the Register, so you could just be made to vanish. When a skivvy like me has a kid between the pantry and the broom-cupboard, all it's good for is to be pitched into the ash-can! No cradle

for *that* sort! He hasn't no right to a family. You always lived with the vegetables, my black-leather shopping bag and my aprons. You used to love to watch me polishing the floors: you used to clap your hands, you little lazybones! D'you remember the day when you ate a whole handful of lentils?—and the other one when you went to sleep with your head in the dough I had made for a pie-crust? Oh! *you* weren't killed in no war—how could you have been, seeing as you're here? It's three months since you turned up. I didn't say a thing. You must be free to do as you wanted. *I* wasn't going to stand in your light. I watched you passing by, but it was hard. But how you have changed! I'm not mad. Why won't you stay the same? why are you trying to confuse my old brain? What harm have I done you?

You mustn't tell a soul as you've seen me. They mustn't know. They'd never forgive me for your being alive. They're a pig-headed lot. What odds does it make that you died for France? For your mother you have never been dead. Let them have their way. We've got peace now. If they want to make believe as you were killed, don't say a thing, don't cross them. They can never take my child from me. They're jealous because I can have my son with me whenever I want, and be happy. Oh! they would have liked me to say yes, to agree to having you buried. I tell *you* that, but don't go spreading it about. You and I are the only living persons here."

"Did you know my father?"

There was still, in the old mother's eyes, a wil-

spark, but on her lids there showed but a trifle more of shadow, the sign of her long waiting, her day-by-day expectancy.

"That I did: he wasn't one as lived unnoticed in the village. Even now, folk keep clear of him, and if they do salute him, 'tis from a distance. They answer him, but never ask no questions. Why are you not with him now?"

"It's all very simple, but also very complicated. I lost my way yesterday evening trying to get home. I was given shelter."

"Somebody always gives you shelter."

"Maybe."

François had got up.

"Don't go into the dining-room: 'tis all upside down."

But he went, all the same, towards the table with its massive legs. On it lay a confusion of glasses and plates, a breadbasket, a cheese dish with the cover removed, and a small bottle of champagne.

"Is it here?"

"Is what here?"

"My father. Yes, he has been here. I ate with him, and the old schoolmaster left us alone together. 'Why do you lie?' he kept on saying: 'who put it into your head to make up such a story, such an infamous, lying story?—answer me!'"

François could not stay long, with there before him the evidences of a meal which must have been eaten in intimacy. He carefully replaced the cover on the cheese dish, and went back to the old woman who looked at him without the least trace of astonishment.

She must have grown accustomed to such visitors, familiar yet sheepish.

"I was in so strange a state, you know, that he said no more. What could I have answered, with my father taking the initiative like that, and putting on that virtuous look of his? I was so unsure of myself in those days when life was just beginning."

"True 'nough: your life here was all of a tremble."

"I abandoned myself to lying. Thanks to that, I could endow my father, standing there ever before me, with something of reality. One must lie, as one jumps into water, without thinking."

"Don't think of all them tales. Put an end to 'em here, if you will, and then go. I've wasted enough time as 'tis."

The old woman seemed to be suddenly overcome. She began to snuffle.

"Drat this dust! it stings my throat!" She had picked up her broom and moved away. François remained standing with flushed cheeks, hot on the trail of a truth which had long lain hidden.

I no longer saw my father as I had done. I had stripped from him all likeness to what he used to be, a smooth-faced man bowed down with grief. I actually wanted him to show his detestation of me publicly, to cast me off to an accompaniment of general approval. . . . I wanted him to be no longer alone in his repudiation of me. I wanted to be an object of repulsion to everybody. That, I agree, was simple-minded on my part. But how could I endure the stifling silence, the whispered words? A child cannot submit to being ignored by those among whom he lives. I

wanted to be known, to be noticed. Through lying, I became an object of talk and pity. I forced tears from the neighbour's eyes, I filled them with astonishment. I was taken seriously: I was a living, a dangerous person. I protested, I asserted myself, I became the very type and image of a wild and frenzied child against whom the grown-ups closed their ranks. Suddenly, and too quickly, I had grown beyond it, and nobody was prepared for this intimidating presence, for this provocation cried aloud by purity abused. I forced my father and his allies into a world of battle and ambush, where even the most harmless words had an undercurrent of equivocal meanings. I made use of my mother, of her tenderness, her frailty. I made use of the past. I made use of our mourning. I even made use of God so that the world in which I wanted to live might admit its powerlessness to bear with me. Poor me! I was serving an immoderately long apprenticeship to evil. But nobody ever saw me at night, curled up in my bed, shivering, howling under the sheets, waiting for a hand to be laid upon my forehead. Who was there who could come to me, still my cries, silence my accusations, teach me how to sleep in the perpetual company of a ghost made miserable by what had happened to me?—my mother? What I wanted was to be a child like other children, chided and smacked, sent supperless to bed or forbidden to go out walking, a child with a home of his very own. My attitude gave evidence of this appeal. Only those who were in the same condition of lying could have been deceived. I was not fascinated by my own falsity: I overdid it, I exaggerated it: I mani-

pulated my perfidy with clumsy hands. I was my own tormentor. Poor me! I have never been freed from that lie. My only object in life has been to hide it. Juliette has put up with it. I have deprived her of my childhood, stolen it away from her, for true love involves the whole of a life. I have concealed from her all the gangrened portion of my heart, the maggoty part. My love for her has had always to shine through that tenacious patch of darkness which lies, curled up, deep in myself, like an animal. What if she is like me?

François passed a hand through his hair. A thin ray of comforting sunlight lay across the floor. A gusty wind was making the shutters creak in their confining catches.

It is time for me to go to my father, to the old man who must be sitting now, bent over his memories, a merciful father, as Christians would say, and no longer the man who stared only at a vision of Hell. He is now once more my father, as naked as myself. Soon I will go to him, asking him no account of his actions. Poor father, an involuntary assassin seen by the uncertain light of my youth which comes back to me trembling on the brink of day. Poor mother, an involuntary victim who leaned upon me thanks to my passion, upright and intense, but who also pulled me back, for the lie cannot hold out against what most it loves. Good-morrow, father: good-morrow, mother, united once again in the soft light set moving by the wind in the leafless branches.

François felt happy. His fatigue had vanished. He looked with respect upon the house which had been

to him a final place of pausing before he should go to his father. He was ready to cross its threshold, to continue his journey. At last he truly had a father, hale, hearty, complete, washed clean by the darkness of the night through which he had just passed.

He went towards the front door, and opened it. He was in a hurry now only to leave this house which knew too much about his life. The old charwoman was in the garden picking stunted dahlias. He went to her and asked that she should keep a watch on Claire.

"She is in need of rest, but, if you hear her move, take a look at her."

"When will Monsieur Jean be back?"

"I don't know: but I think it will be soon."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know."

She went on with her picking without lifting her eyes to François. He walked down an unkempt path where tall, delicate scabious flowers were waving daintily. He closed the gate with its ironwork screen behind him. The earth, this morning, was drenched in fragrance—the fragrance of growing things devoid of grossness. He passed beneath a chestnut-tree from which the leaves were falling in a continuous shower, kicking the half-open burrs with their sharp spikes. All of a sudden he remembered something which had lain forgotten in him since his earliest years. He took a burr between his two feet and pressed upon it. The nuts came out all smooth and shining, with a touch of silver down upon their upper sides. He picked them up and put them in his pocket. When he turned his head he saw the old woman making a clumsy

gesture of farewell with her hand, or, perhaps, signalling to him to return.

François hurried, but about a hundred yards further on, Simon was waiting for him.

"Well, young man?"

"Claire is in the house. She is sleeping, and should be left to wake of her own accord."

"And there was I all the while tramping round the pond and questioning a couple of fishermen! . . . You've taken your time over your visit. Fortunately, you're honest, and jewels don't lie about on the tables in schoolmasters' houses . . . though other things may. . . . D'you know that this place once belonged to the poor fellow who's lying dead back there? They tell me he used it as a trysting-place, like Louis XV's Parc aux Cerfs. He was more modest, and took his browsing where he found it. After his wife's death, he sold it—more's the pity. The Municipality would give a good price for it to-day. The poor mutt ruined himself, without realizing what he was doing—a patch of ground here, a tumble-down cottage there, things that melt like snow in the sun. Come along and let's get home. A good cup of coffee'd be welcome. I'll tell my wife to come for Claire—that's woman's work. I've got to go and see some clients with a grievance. You're on your way to Chauvigny, aren't you? Whom are you going to see there?"

François was about to reply when the boy Paulo came running towards them.

"Papa! they're waiting for you up at the house. Mamma told me to ask you for some money, I'm going to market for her. She's short of milk and

sugar: and I've got to buy an exercise-book and a satchel. I saw you coming from a long way off."

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"Have you found Claire?"

"Yes: she's perfectly all right where she is, for the present."

"Where is she?"

"She's changing. She'll be back soon with the wedding-dress."

"I'll go and look for her."

François set off at a run for fear that Simon might follow him. Paulo sniffed. His ears were very red. Their lobes were enormous, perhaps because they had once been frost-bitten.

"Why isn't she changing in her own room?"

Simon pushed the brat in front of him.

"Keep your curiosity until you go to school on Monday. And if you're not among the top few, you'll get a good thrashing."

"Who's going to thrash me?"

"I am: I give you fair warning!"

François came back with the lovely dress over one arm. He had rolled up the train, and it lay like an enormous ball against his chest. One end of the sash was fluttering in the wind.

They set off towards the house. Simon appeared to be in a lively mood. François did his best to be friendly.

"You must let me have your address, monsieur."

"Don't you know it?"

"No: I've no idea where it is you live."

Simon laughed: his good humour had brought

about a great change in his thin, sharp face. He flushed.

"Silly of me: of course, you'd lost your way."

A lumpish sun, like glowing orange, leapt from behind the motionless branches on which were clearly visible clumps of black and airy mistletoe, and the spiky nests of clamorous rooks.

The sharp cold made François and his companion hungry, and they walked more quickly. The country-side was slow in waking, as though still exhausted by the summer heats, and unsurprised by the strange absence of people working in the fields. Only the wood-gatherers were afoot, making for home. They pushed their little handcarts before them with a cloth carelessly thrown over the faggots. They walked with their eyes on the ground. Birds, fat as pigs, were jumping from hummock to hummock, from hedge to hedge, squabbling and jaunty. The soil looked pale. As yet it had not been turned, and the peasants were letting it lie fallow, a breeding-ground for purslane and dandelion. It was growing green again to no purpose, was being left alone for this was the time of pause before the last great ploughings. The earth was reverting to wildness and indiscipline.

They did not have far to walk. In daylight the distance which had seemed great to François was revealed now as no more than a few hundred yards. He could see clearly the roof of the house, and, in a hollow, Chauvigny clustered timorously about its tower. The roof-slates glittered like fish-scales. There were no leaves now upon the trees to hide the view. In front of him was an enormous spread of country

with patches of tawny woodland. The world had taken on its morning look. There was no longer anything frightening about this compact landscape, unsophisticated and domestic. A slight girdle of mist round Chauvigny was rapidly fraying out. A bell was sounding a determined note.

François had accepted with pleasure a great bowl of *café au lait*. He did not bother about cream, which he did not like. The bread tasted delectable: the butter had the flavour of buds. It only now remained for him to take his leave. He went out of the kitchen in search of the dressmaker. He found her in the room where he had slept. She was crying with her head against the back of a chair. He dared not approach the worn-out, shaken figure. But she raised her face.

"Are you going?"

Her voice was strained and strange, but she pulled herself together.

"Yes, it's time you went: they might be getting uneasy about you."

François made an evasive gesture:

"I wanted to thank you. . . ."

"What a night you've been through! You won't forget it easily. But don't think ill of us. Our misery is the best thing about us: it has been our offering to you, and I can assure you that it told no lies. I, too, give you thanks—for Claire and for the dress. When you have gone I shall go and see Claire. Would you like something more to eat?"

"Thank you, no: I have had enough."

She blew her nose on a large starched handkerchief,

then vigorously wiped her eyes, as though to take from them all trace of grief.

"It is not worth while our knowing one another's names. You will forget this halt upon your journey. Not everyone would have relished it. There are those who might have been surprised by what they found here. But we can't be judged, isn't that so? Now, set off on your way."

François buttoned up his wind-cheater, and ran a comb through his hair, with a word of apology, in front of the looking-glass.

"Are you still worried about mademoiselle Claire?"

"There is only one foolishness she might commit—and that is to stop loving. We are not brought into this world to live alone. I am suspicious of experience: experience has never changed anybody. I thought you were less young than you are. This morning you look like a child, a rather stern child. You must treat this bad night as a dream."

Suddenly, François heard a farm-cart stopping in front of the door. A horse's hoof struck the stone threshold with a melancholy sound.

Raymonde, the dressmaker, had gone pale. She raised a hand to her throat.

"They've come for him. . . ."

François said nothing, and she went on:

"They are taking him home. The funeral will not take place, I think, before Monday. . . . How lonely he will be in his old bed!"

Marthe came hurrying in to her sister-in-law.

"They're here already. We shall need somebody to help put him in the cart."

François stepped forward:
"Before taking my leave. . . ."
"It's not a job for a young man, I know. It is an unpleasant experience. You must forgive us."

Marthe had gone on ahead, walking briskly. A loud commotion sounded from the road. A travelling circus was passing. Pot-bellied little ponies with rough and ill-kempt coats were following along behind a green-painted van. A woman came into the house through the open door, offering for sale surprise-packets done up in newspaper. Confronted by the silence of the inmates, she turned away with her basket.

"I ask your pardon, ladies and gents all, I didn't know."

Paulo watched from a window the passing of the little gaudily-coloured procession. He clapped his hands at sight of a monkey which was pulling faces and clowning.

François moved quietly into the death-chamber. There was a lump in his throat. It came to him that in half an hour at most he would be in his father's house. Luncheon would be served in the dining-room smelling of stale bread. They would have to be careful about opening the shutters. He pushed open the door with the same trembling fear he used to feel when his father sat waiting for him at the far end of his study with a financial newspaper in his hand, and his spectacles pushed up on his forehead.

And it was, indeed, his father waiting for him there upon the bed, his gaze confined under thin blue lids. His father dead and cold for all eternity.

"Papa!".

A farmer came towards him, wearing black, and freshly shaven.

"Good day to you, poor Monsieur François. Don't you recognize me? I am Jérôme. I did not know that you had arrived already. Will you, please, take the shoulders, very gently? The arms will not drop: the fingers are linked together."

Without saying a word, François lifted his father's body, carried it out to the wagon, slid it forward on the plank floor, and covered it with a blanket. Then a sheet was spread. With brutal suddenness he realized that there was a dead body under the starched, white covering. He climbed on to the box-seat beside the farmer, his eyes closed upon a glowing picture which ended by bursting into flames and collapsing in ashes. It was then that he cried, though without turning his head to the motionless and silent group. The day was lovely. The sky was swept clear of clouds. The blue was still light and faint, as though washed out. He could hear the hoarse cry of jackdaws and the monotonous sing-song of the rabbit-skin merchant who was moving from farm to farm, pushing his bicycle with its load of stiff pelts upon the handlebar.

"You are going to have a difficult day, my poor Monsieur François. But you'll be able to go to the cemetery without getting wet. This weather will hold until Monday."

